THE SOUNDS OF FAIRY CULTURE: MUSIC, FANTASY LIFESTYLES,

AND ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I investigate fairy culture through its music. Fairy music, the music that intersects with these communities, is incredibly diverse, ranging from the protest music of gay rights movements, to music emanating from Irish fairy-forts, to TikTok video soundtracks. I argue that the resurgence of fairy imagery and appropriation today is a reaction to modernity, with fairies symbolizing the antithesis of industrial capitalism, secularity, and heteronormativity. Furthermore, I argue that music in this culture is largely connected to place. People use music to identify locations as liminal spaces between reality and "the Otherworld" through storytelling and performance. Social media users actively enchant their surroundings by evoking the sounds of fantasy worlds. When outsiders to these communities dismiss these as eccentric fringe cultures, they fail to recognize the global influence of these movements, which build upon a historic precedent of activism, enchantment, and new ways of understanding the world.

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To all of the little sisters in the world teaching their big sisters about fairies,

especially Tessa.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Outside of the University of Oregon Knight Library, just next to the book pick-up window that I have utilized extensively throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, stands a bronze statue of Opal Whiteley, who was a student here a little more than a century ago.[1] Whiteley (1897-1992) called herself the Sunshine Fairy, and she had a remarkable curiosity and love for the natural world.[2] She grew up in Cottage Grove, Oregon and was known locally for her eccentricity and wealth of ecological knowledge at a young age. She not only delivered lectures as a UO student, but also educated the wider community on Oregon ecology. What made Whiteley's teaching unique was her ability to infuse science with wonder and poetry, which is perhaps why her ideas were particularly attractive to children. Whiteley became a national sensation with the publication of her compelling childhood diary, although it also brought her much scrutiny for its questionable authenticity. Before this diary, however, she self-published a collection of her essays and lectures titled *The Fairyland Around Us.* This work is a guide to recognizing the magic in the plants, animals, and fairies that move within our environment. Her opening dedication to the book speaks to the value

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[1] This statue was sculpted by UO graduate Ellen Tykeson and installed in this location in 2019.

[2] Michelle Dean, "Opal Whiteley's Riddles," *The New Yorker,* Aug. 23, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/opal-whiteleys-riddles.

of seeing the world through this lens, which is something I seek to emulate throughout this thesis. She writes:

> "To you, little children over the world, who are dreaming of a fairyland far distant, and who are longing to know the fairies, this book of The Fairyland Around Us in God's Outdoors is dedicated. And also to you grown-ups, who have kept your faith in childhood, and who are seeking inspiration for your work in the everyday things around you."[3]

Whiteley's mental health is said to have declined rapidly as a young adult, and she eventually committed herself to a mental hospital in London where she stayed until her death in 1992. Throughout the process of producing this thesis, Whiteley has served as a reminder to me of the immense joy of being able to research and write about what fairies mean to people. To me, she represents the experience of so many people across the world who have used the language of fairy lore for centuries to imbue magic and wonder into their landscapes.

This thesis seeks in part to attest to the value of fairy stories and draw out the profundity of fairy symbolism and imagery. This material is deeply meaningful to people, young and old, and the Internet seems to have facilitated a growing interest in fairy lore, fairy aesthetics, and even fairy interaction. My own childhood was saturated with the fairies of books, movies, and Cajun lore. I was taught to look out for the *feu follet* (comparable to the English will-o'-the-wisp) just like I was taught to look out for alligator eyes and other potential swamp hazards. These stories were valuable to my childhood because they urged me to attentively listen to and take note of the world around me.

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[3] I modified the format of this dedication since the original is broken up by small phrases and words and unpunctuated. Opal Stanley Whiteley, *The Fairyland Around Us,* Los Angeles: Self-published,1918.

According to Western European traditions, fairies are rooted in ancient lore and serve as vestiges of a pre-modern and pagan society. They have also been associated with resistance throughout European history, from fairy belief in Ireland despite the pressure to assimilate into English society, to Shakespeare's morally ambiguous and androgynous trickster fairy characters. Today, fairies have taken on a new punk angle. "Fairycore" and "goblincore" are popular tags on social media platforms, where people construct their identities around these nature-oriented fantasy creatures. For many people, this is more than a mere aesthetic choice. Fairy culture often falls at the intersection of political and spiritual ideologies, and this "punk" attitude pushes back against capitalism, industrialization, and heteronormativity.

Music is one of the strongest performative aspects of those that identify with fairies today. There are musicians who cater specifically to fantasy culture, constructing the musical aesthetics of fantasy worlds. Participants in these subcultures also have power in determining musical fairy aesthetics by creating musical playlists on platforms like Spotify and YouTube. These playlists, of which there seems to be an endless number, aid in the aural enchantment of participants' lived experiences as well as inform participants' fantasy performances. Music is also used in the retelling of fairy stories. One reason why storytellers might use music as a token of fairy encounters is because its ephemerality makes it difficult to disprove. From hearing mysterious, ethereal strains in the woods, to learning tunes directly from fairies, music is often the point of entry for Otherworldly experiences.

Musicologists have studied compositions based in fantasy worlds, such as Francesca Brittan's research on the *genre fantastique* popularized by Berlioz, Weber, and Mendelssohn. Yet, folk stories and participation in fairy-inspired music remain unexplored by musicologists and remain the domain of folklore and anthropology without a focus on the musical aspect of these encounters. This thesis focuses on the music-makers that live on the fringes of mainstream culture, donning fairy-inspired wardrobes, aligning themselves with fantasy worlds, and even claiming to have heard music from Otherworldly beings. When people say that they have heard fairy music, they are often bearing witness to a profound musical experience that they cannot otherwise explain. One musicological implication here is that "music" can be produced by non-human entities. This aligns fairy music with eco-musicological discourse, as listening for fairies puts listeners in touch with the sounds of the natural world. Because this is where fairy music is heard, environmentalism is an important aspect of modern fairy belief and storytelling. Whether or not fairy music has explanations in nature or they are indeed produced by a small, magical race of people, we (humans) have a tendency to try to prescribe a source. This requires listeners to navigate their own beliefs, knowledge, and willingness to accept something extraordinary. I explore the reasons why people are still prescribing music to fairies and other fantasy creatures, especially far away from the places where these stories first originated.

In this thesis, I investigate fairy culture through its music. Fairy music, the music that intersects with these communities, is incredibly diverse, ranging from the protest music of gay rights movements, to music emanating from Irish fairy-

forts, to the soundtracks applied to videos on TikTok. I argue that the resurgence of fairy imagery and appropriation today is a reaction to modernity, with fairies symbolizing the antithesis of industrial capitalism, secularity, and heteronormativity. Furthermore, I argue that music in this culture is largely connected to place. Music is used to identify locations as liminal spaces between reality and "the Otherworld" through a variety of storytelling and performance. Social media users also use music to actively enchant their surroundings by evoking the sounds of fantasy worlds. Sonic indices of the otherworld might include harps (associated with ancient Gaels), heavy reverb, musical references to fantasy films, and even sounds that we might associate with the miniature such as music boxes or other toy-like instruments. In my exploration of these sounds I will consider how fairy culture traverses religion, race, feminism, environmental advocacy, and a culture of "loose knit anarchy."[4]

In Chapter II I explore fairy imagery and appropriation in resistance, which demonstrates their symbolic aptitude for combatting oppression. I trace fairies' history from early modern peasant revolts to modern activist movements, considering how their representations have changed and how some of their original associations with misbehavior still hold. The research of Richard Firth Green and Mary Ellen Lamb inform my understanding of the fairy lore and peasant uprisings of fifteenth century England. While Green shows how the laity, upper and lower classes, shared a common language when it came to fairy lore, Lamb describes how lore especially served the disenfranchised through

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[4] Lucinda Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate : Sustainability & Freedom in an Evolving Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012) 103.

euphemisms and social contracts. I suggest that the church's denunciation or demonization of fairies contributed to fairies' symbolic potency. I also engage with Silvia Federici's writings on the relationship between the witch trials and Europe's transition to capitalism, and we see how this early modern genocide becomes a thread in the reclamation of witchcraft in twentieth-century feminist movements. Next I consider Victorian-era conceptions of fairies in art, guided by the work of Marian Wilson Kimber on Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1842). In visual art, theatre, and music, artists began to depict fairies as female, illustrating an erotic fascination with paganism. Industrialism also spurred new anxieties about "a fading British past," which was perceived as a threat to fairies, as Carole Silver has argued.[5] Robert Hutton's writing on nineteenth-century interest in paganism and magic in literature also contributes to this section.

I then consider the archetypal role that fairies adopt in late twentieth-century culture and media as stewards of the natural world. I support this with Kumi Kato's article on how Japanese and Tasmanian students used imagery from Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) in a direct action against deforestation. Drawing primarily from the writings of conservation biologist Robert Michael Pyle, I discuss how government officials and conservationists have utilized Bigfoot lore to establish protected land in the Pacific Northwest. Lastly, I discuss the fairies invoked within modern witchcraft. As detailed in the writings of Starhawk, one of the most influential Witches today, fairies are

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[5] Carole Silver, "On the Origin of Fairies: Victorians, Romantics, and Folk Belief," *Browning Institute Studies* 14 (1986): 142. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057792.

understood as an ominous presence within the natural world, and they are also tied to the ancestral history of "Goddess peoples," an ancient race of women.[6]

I conclude this chapter by taking a closer look at a group formed in San Francisco in the mid-1970s by gay male activists called the Radical Faeries. The accumulation of meaning behind fairies for centuries is evident through the Radical Faeries, who proudly appropriate fairies as symbols of their distinction from the mainstream, their outrageous self-love and joy, and their resilience. Still active today, this group eschews the gender binary and heteronormativity at large. I explore this group by way of *Ye Faerie Hymnal,* an assemblage of lyrics found on their main website. These songs demonstrate their neo-pagan sensibilities, their privileging of the natural world, and their celebration of femininity. In considering the Faeries' pre-march circle-casting at the New York City Drag March, I engage with David Berman's writings on camp aesthetics to underscore the subversive power of their rhetoric, fashion, and music. Their music serves to affirm their values, and it is also used as a tool for provocation as we will see with the tune "God is a Lesbian." This group illustrates the attraction of fairy symbolism to marginalized voices and those up against insurmountable odds.

Chapter III explores fairy belief, spiritual practices, and storytelling that treat music as a window to the faerie realm. I begin by building off of Lucinda Carspecken's 2012 ethnography of Lothlorien, an egalitarian Southern Indiana

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[6] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 20th Anniversary Ed, (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) 44.

community based on Tolkien's elven forest.[7] Here I focus on the beliefs and ritual practices of residents and visitors, and I more closely analyze the drumming that accompanies Thunder Dome rituals. I engage with Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* as a primary source on circle-casting in witchcraft, and I put this in conversation with Graham St. John's research on altered states of consciousness in electronic dance music. Guided by these sources and my own online ethnography, I show how these rituals attempt to dissociate participants spatially, aurally, and temporally from their ordinary lives by creating a liminal space between reality and the Otherworld.

Next I examine the storytelling traditions of Ireland in which music often serves as a token of encounters with the fairies. Mysteriously occurring music has been used to identify fairy forts, situating them as sites of intrigue to locals. Keith Basso's writings on place-making among the Western Apache aids me in considering how these stories are built into the landscape, and I suggest how this proximity along with claims of music aid in the storyteller's believability. Informed by the ethnographic work of folklorists Henry Glassie and Ray Cashman, I analyze the fairy stories of Eddie Lenihan, one of Ireland's most renowned storytellers today through his podcast *Tell Me A Story with Eddie Lenihan*.

I conclude with my own online ethnographic work to illustrate how stories of fairy music have worldwide appeal. One similar aspect between encounter stories found online and those of the Irish tradition is that music often fulfills a

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[7] J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy literature, especially *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy, is referenced several times throughout this thesis.

similar function. Whether understood as a blessing or a warning, it serves to signal to listeners that they have come into contact with fairies. I close this chapter by considering the stories and music of Jeremy Garner, a New Zealand musician who has used online platforms to attest to his experiences in Faerieland. Garner serves as an example of musicians who claim to have learned music from fairies. I argue that these stories offer both storytellers and listeners a way to draw meaning out of their experiences.

Chapter IV introduces readers to an active subculture that lies at the margins of the mainstream, operating under the hashtags "fairycore" and "goblincore." My methodology is largely ethnographic as I critically examine the production and circulation of images and videos on social media, which constitute an important aspect of twenty-first century musical practice.[8] Engaging with Hans Skott-Myhre's writing on "serious play" in youth subcultures, I argue that these performances are not trivial, but important sites of social commentary. Users construct alternate realities through multifaceted miniature performances, showcasing their values, complex identities, and aspirations for the future.

I begin by describing the technological allowances and limitations on Instagram and TikTok, specifically considering their content algorithms, and I provide a thick description of the content found under fairycore and goblincore. I then focus on the ways that race, gender, and sexuality are exemplified within

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[8] Paula Clare Harper, "Unmute This: Circulation, Sociality, and Sound in Viral Media," PhD diss., Columbia University, 2019, https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-6rte-j311.

these subcultures. Andrew Peck's article "Capturing the Slender Man: Online and Offline Vernacular Practice in the Digital Age" informs my understanding of online communities. Using the example of the Slender Man myth, Peck demonstrates how today's technological affordances encourage a sense of collaboration among users and an "awareness that individual actions exist as part of a larger body of practice."[9] Here I will show how users navigate algorithms and create communities of "mutuals" in order to uplift the work of marginalized participants. Foucault's concept of heterotopia, as explicated by Peter Johnson, informs my approach to the alternative spaces found within this digital content. I examine how users construct fantasy heterotopias through the use of costume, filters, sound/music, and accompanying captions to spatially and temporally dissociate them from everyday life. Natural landscapes, pre-modern activities, and music/sounds help augment this dissociation. Music aurally signals to viewers that these places are inspired by fantasy worlds. I conclude this chapter by exploring the music that accompanies these performances, considering what makes them "fairycore," how music circulates among participants, and the musicians who cater to these subcultures.

This thesis reveals "Fairy culture" to be far from a homogenous community; rather, it brings together many different cultures that identify with fairies or find value in fairy lore. When outsiders to these communities dismiss these as eccentric fringe cultures, they fail to recognize the global influence of

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[9] Andrew Peck, "Capturing the Slender Man: Online and Offline Vernacular Practice in the Digital Age," *Cultural Analysis* 16, no. 1 (2017): 33.

these movements, which build upon a long historic precedent of activism, enchantment, and different ways of understanding the world. A common thread throughout these chapters is the subversive nature of fairies, which contributes to their resonance with the aesthetics of punk. By punk, I mean a deliberate subversion of mainstream culture. It is *punk* to dress like a fairy, to believe in fairies, and to identify as a fairy, especially in a world that trivializes fairies for their associations with childlike naivety. Thinking about fairies is far from childish; rather, it urges us to view the world through a lens of enchantment and mystery. That is why Opal Whiteley encourages us, in deliberately broad language, to search for "the Joyous Blue" in nature.[10] In doing so, one may come across a fairy, but one might also find that their perception of the natural world has shifted. Viewing the world in this way re-enchants our surroundings, and it becomes clear that flowers, butterflies, and Great Blue Herons are magical in their own right.

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[10] In more concrete terms, Whiteley encourages searching for anything blue within nature to open up our eyes to our surroundings. Whiteley, *The Fairyland Around Us,* 18.

CHAPTER II

"FAIRIES" PUSHING BACK: FAIRY SYMBOLISM AND SONG IN RESISTANCE

In the Tolkien universe, the crucial difference between Elves and Men is that

Man's finite lifespan results in a passion for life and urgency that the Elves

inherently lack.[11] Tolkien's Ents ("tree-herds" or stewards of Fangorn Forest)

were unconcerned with the affairs of men until they witnessed first-hand the

wizard Saruman's destruction to their ancient forest. In preparation for war,

Saruman's Orcs cut down Fangorn's trees to serve as fuel for Isengard's industrial

fires.[12] It is easy to draw a parallel between Saruman and European industrial-

capitalism, especially as Tolkien was writing in the aftermath of massive

European industrialization and two world wars. In the words of the Ent

Treebeard:

> He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and
> he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the
> moment. . . . Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my
> friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their
> own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble
> where once there were singing groves. I have been idle. I have let things slip.
> It must stop![13]

Enraged at the loss their friends, the Ents storm Isengard and flood its

underground furnaces and machinery.[14] This scene from the 2002 Peter Jackson

film *The Two Towers* along with movies such as *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest*

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[11] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion,* 2nd ed, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001) 41-42.

[12] Orcs are bred here, and this is presumably where Saruman forges his weapons of war.
[13] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,1994) 463.

[14] Tolkien, *The Two Towers,* 475-476.

(1993) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) has inspired a generation of fantasy enthusiasts to reflect on humankind's relationship with the natural world.[15]

In this chapter, I demonstrate the symbolic power of fairies in combatting oppression. As a symbol, they have represented misbehavior and impropriety (15th century), femininity (19th century), queerness (20th – 21st century), and stewardship of the natural world (late 20th – 21st century). This symbolic history has culminated in fairies' fitness to serve movements that combat oppression, particularly today in gay rights and environmental movements. We will see how fairies' reception changed over time as well as how their original association with misbehavior lends itself to modern-day activism.

I will start by tracing the history of fairy symbolism in the peasant-revolts of fifteenth-century England. I will then fast-forward to the nineteenth century, when fairies were feminized in visual art, literature, and theatre. This is also when they began to be represented as victims of industrialism. From there I will explore fairy symbolism in twentieth-century activism and environmentalism, specifically considering the influential fairies of cinema, the utilization of Bigfoot lore in forest stewardship, and the activism of Starhawk's covens. A major thread throughout this history is the comparison between fairies as fragile creatures in need of protection or as resilient and powerful threats to authority. This difference in depiction parallels the changing gender norms and feminist movements of the twentieth century, and it culminates with the use of fairies to represent a divine feminine power. I will then show how this history is illustrated

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[15] Growing up on the Mississippi River, the factories, mills, and power plants always reminded me of Isengard.

within The Radical Faeries, a neo-pagan, environmentally conscious, gay rights group that was established in the United States in the 1970s and still remains active today. I will explore this group by way of their music, specifically considering the Faerie Hymnal and other online performances as they relates to their spirituality, environmentalism, their embrace of femininity, and their talent for provocation. I will demonstrate how this group has reclaimed the derogatory use of "fairy" by turning it into a symbol of anti-authoritarian pride and radical self-love.

A History of Resistance

Fifteenth-century European peasants might well have been surprised that people would someday mobilize in order to "protect" the forest from other people. This was still a time when people had reason to fear the forest and the mysteries it housed, such as beasts (real and mythiFcal) and wild men. Interestingly, Mary Ellen Lamb notes that some of the "rough men" of sixteenth-century England were likely people who sought refuge in the forest due to society's harsh treatment of their physical and/or mental differences. These people lived on the outskirts of society but would sometimes in secret perform burdensome tasks in exchange for goods. Lamb suggests that the cream and baked goods "left out for the fairies" by kitchen cooks (usually older women) may have been a sort of exchange with these people in return for labor. All of this to

say, the forest's well-being would likely not have been a concern. It was class oppression that inspired peasant revolts in the medieval era.[16]

In his writing on fairy belief in the Middle Ages, Richard Firth Green maintains that fairy belief was not just "folk" lore, but rather the lore of European laity across social classes. Nobility, knights, and peasants all partook in these tales or "superstitions," which Christian religious authorities attempted to either disregard, work into religious dogma, or condemn as heresy.[17] Green notes that the church's many campaigns to extinguish fairy belief are evidence of their potency within European society. These beliefs were threatening to religious authorities because they were ideologically combative. Particularly distressing to the church were tales of fairies' overindulgent sexuality, their capacity to procreate with humans, their mortality (which made them distinguishable from demons and therefore not under their jurisdiction), and their ability to know the future or bestow prescience as a gift. These qualities challenged the authority of God and the church. Despite the church's attempts, fairy lore persisted covertly.[18]

Silvia Federici notes that in the class conflicts amidst the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the nobility and church moved together to stifle proletariat rebellions.[19] In sum, the artisans and peasants leading these rebellions

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[16] Mary Ellen Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in A Midsummer Night's Dream," *Shakespeare Quarterly 51*, no. 3 (2000): 295-296.

[17] It was the literate members of medieval society who provided all of the documentation we still have today of fairy belief, which is just one of many indications that these beliefs were not only circulating among peasants. Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars : Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) 43.

[18] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars,* 41, 49.
[19] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, Second, Revised ed (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2014) 49.

were calling for the bourgeoisie and nobility, who had formed an alliance, to share the wealth they obtained through the privatization of land and the forceful accumulation of peasant labor.[20] Both Green and Mary Ellen Lamb write about a series of rebellions of this nature between 1450-1451 in England in which peasants rebelled against oppressive regulations and demanded a right to land and property. Of interest here is that these protesters adopted fairy personas, adding a crucial performance element to their rebellions.

In 1451, Jack Cade led an uprising in which rebels secured a territory and designated it "fairyland" while Cade dubbed himself "Queen of the Fairies."[21] Cade asserted his right to land by way of a magical fairy lineage, parodying how the elite framed their rights to land ownership. Cade's underlying message about the absurdity of their claims was strengthened by the shared language of fairy lore.[22] In the same year, a group of people led by William Cheeseman and Tom Crudd dressed "with long beards and painted on their faces with black charcoal" and broke into the duke of Buckingham's preserve, poaching ten bucks and seventy-two does.[23] They called themselves "servants of the Queen of the Fairies," and their festive outfits worked doubly as disguises.[24] By becoming *servants* of the Fairy Queen, participants exonerated themselves from responsibility for their

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[20] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 49, 64.

[21] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 291.

[22] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars,* 22.

[23] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 291.

[24] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 291.

actions. After all, they were merely acting in the name of the Queen, which according to the class system they were critiquing, even the elite should understand.

Rather than admitting stolen goods, "fairy gifts" were a common euphemism for suspicious possessions, which is another reason fairy imagery was fitting within these rebellions. Lamb explains that throughout the early modern era, fairy stories were also used to protect the vulnerable, especially women. For instance, they were used to account for such things as sudden infant deaths, unusual disappearances, disabilities/deformities, and illicit sexual activity. They offered people a way to gracefully evade difficult truths as well as criminal prosecution. Lamb writes that in order for these narratives to serve any social function, they "required the assent of the community."[25] In other words, "playing along" was a social courtesy, and it was understood that the truth might cause undue harm or was at the very least difficult to acknowledge. The peasant rebellions in 1451 were different, however, in that they were not defensive, but offensive. Whether or not rebels were acting out of personal greed or social protest, they were attempting to resolve what seemed to be an unfair distribution of wealth and power. They chose to be fairies, rather than saints or devils, because fairies were at once gift-givers and punishers. Their moral ambivalence meant that it would not be out of character for them to both steal from the elite and gift the poor.

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[25] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 294.

While Lamb notes that "fairy" rebels committed property theft into the eighteenth century, appearing in rural France, Connaught, and also literature, namely Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1,* she does not explicitly connect fairies' aptness for rebellion as related to the church's denunciation of fairy lore.[26] I suggest that the efforts of the church to ensure that fairies were considered devilish allusions (if not to be disregarded entirely) made fairies compelling markers of resistance to oppression. From Ireland to the continent, the church comprehensively attempted to control vernacular culture, which I propose ultimately produced a widespread new symbol of resistance for peasants. Fairies stood in opposition to church and political authority (not necessarily Christianity itself), and they represented a sinister and threatening force exempt from any regulations.[27]

Land bondage and serfdom was almost entirely abolished by the fifteenth century in England, with serfs being replaced by free farmers who held leases and worked for fair wages. The proletariat class came to hold a substantial amount of power, which led to a counter-revolution from the bourgeoisie and nobility. Federici writes that in an effort to "co-opt the youngest and most rebellious male workers," political authorities strategically turned class conflict into a war on women by the end of the century. This "climate of intense misogyny" desensitized people of all classes to women's suffering, culminating in the beginning of the witch trials. "Witchcraft" encompassed many practices or beliefs that were and

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[26] In Henry VI, Part 1, the character Falstaff names his bandits "Diana's foresters . . . minions of the moon" (1.2.25-26). Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 291-292.

[27] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars,* 22.

compatible with fairy lore: the use of charms, cosmology, prophecies, and even simply having special relationships with animals. The women accused of witchcraft were generally just participating in vernacular culture, but they posed a significant threat to the rationalization of work, undermining the control of the nobility in the transition to capitalism.[28] The witch trials are a critical thread in the reclamation of witchcraft and paganism later in twentieth-century feminist movements. Between 1435 and 1487, the same time period in which fairy-themed rebellions took place, twenty-eight new treatises on witchcraft were written, which reveals how threatening these practices were to church and political authorities.[29] These trials would eventually kill hundreds of thousands of people, the vast majority women, in Europe and North and South America. This was a genocide stretched out over two centuries, and it explicitly targeted traditional/indigenous practices, Black and Indigenous people, and femininity.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600) is important to the symbolic history of fairies because it illustrates the development of upper-class affinities for fairies and fantasy worlds based in enchantment and mystery, rather than danger and heresy. Here we begin to see fairies being represented as "uncharacteristically benevolent."[30] Because the play served as entertainment for both lower and upper class audiences, it was important to cater to the dominant culture, therefore Shakespeare took care not to represent fairies as threatening. Shakespeare makes them attractive to the upper classes by associating them with

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[28] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 47-48,142-143, 164, 194.

[29] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 165.

[30] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 308.

Greek antiquity, relegating them to what seems like a separate and ethereal forest world, and miniaturizing them, which looks ahead to late Romantic depictions of fairies as children.[31] Even Robin Goodfellow is represented by a much more courtly and obedient Puck, losing his notorious hairiness and aggressive sexuality.[32] There are, however, subtle signals to the lower class's subversive use of fairy lore, which may have washed over upper-class audience members. For example, Bottom's escapades with the fairy queen Titania literalize a common euphemism in which illicit sexual behaviors are spoken about as adventures with the fairies.[33]

By the nineteenth century, fairies held a very different place in popular culture, which was largely due to rapidly changing European landscapes and lifestyles. Marian Wilson Kimber writes that Victorians had an intense nostalgia for a pre-industrial and pre-urbanized England, leading to an increased interest in the supernatural.[34] These interests coalesced with a curiosity for ancient paganism; Hutton notes that even the words "heathen" and "pagan" began to have "widely accepted associations with the countryside and the natural world."[35] This nostalgia is reflected in Victorian visual art, literature, theatre, and music,

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[31] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 308. Marian Wilson Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream in England," Nineteenth-century Music Review 4, no. 1 (2007) 78.

[32] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 308.

[33] Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 304.

[34] Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn," 53.

[35] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon : A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 3.

and here we can see here how fairy depictions shifted since the early modern era.

While medieval fairies were generally understood as androgynous, Victorian

fairies were typically depicted female, and they were also exceptionally erotic,

modeling the pagan connotations of freedom and self-indulgence.[36] Kimber

writes that the fairies of literature and art were "often used as a mode of escape

into sexual fantasy and a free imaginative pantheism..."[37] At the end of the

century, fairies underwent another transformation in popular culture by being

represented as childlike.[38] Their past connotations were not entirely forgotten,

though, evident by this excerpt from Rudyard Kipling's 1906 *Puck of Pook's Hill:*

> Can you wonder that the People of the Hills don't care to be confused with
> that painty-winged, wand-waving, sugar-and-shake-your-head set of
> imposters? Butterfly wings, indeed![39]

While stories of powerful fairies still lingered amongst the folk, the fairies of

popular culture in England were dainty, precious, and harmless.[40] I argue that

the most profound effect that this had on their symbolic development is that it

allowed them to be victimized. Specifically, fairies became victims of

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[36] Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn," 53. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 3.

[37] Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn," 65.

[38] Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn," 78.

[39] Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn," 79.

[40] It is clear that stories of powerful fairies more akin to the Irish *Sidhe* still circulated amongst folk cultures in Evans-Wentz ethnographic work in *The Fairy-faith in Celtic Countries*. Evans Wentz, W. Y. *The Fairy-faith in Celtic Countries*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1911. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34853/34853-h/34853-h.htm#CHAPTER_V. Accessed Feb. 24, 2021.

industrialization. As we will see, this is impetus for them becoming powerful symbols of environmental stewardship in the twentieth century.

Carole Silver writes that nineteenth-century English fascination in fairies was driven in part by nostalgia for "a fading British past" as well as nationalistic impulses.[41] The desire to document English fairy lore was made especially urgent in the 1790s because there was a sense that industrialization and urbanization were driving out the fairies.[42] This sentiment continued throughout the century, and it was made explicit by author William Bottrell's 1880 observation that the tales of mermaids were fading because mermaids "so much dislike steam ships that the fair syrens have taken themselves off, with all their combs and glasses to the China seas, so as to be out of the way of the fiery monsters of the deep."[43] Hutton writes that the second half of the nineteenth century saw the idealization of rural England, plateauing between 1880-1930. Authors at this time often used pagan imagery to illustrate the "divine" and "ancient" quality of the outdoors with allusions to Pan, Mother Nature, and fairies or spirits.[44] No longer entities to be feared, fairies were part of "England's precious heritage."[45] Artists and writers seemed to antagonize industrialism in relation to fairies: fairies were ancient,

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[41] Ireland, France, and Germany all had strong bodies of folklore. Carole Silver, "On the Origin of Fairies: Victorians, Romantics, and Folk Belief," *Browning Institute Studies* 14 (1986): 142. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057792.

[42] Silver, "On the Origin of Fairies," 142.

[43] Ronald M. James, *The Folklore of Cornwall: The Oral Tradition of a Celtic Nation*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2018) 59.

[44] Hutton claims a plateau rather than a peak because it has "not diminished significantly since." Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 117-118.

[45] Silver, "On the Origin of Fairies," 142.

organic, and their representation as beautiful and seductive female bodies or the bodies of children in art and literature contributed to their vulnerability; industrialism was mechanical, loud, exemplary of modern progress, but ruinous to the landscape. This opposition contributed to the idea that fairies needed protection from industrialization. Even amongst the folk, who still circulated stories of fairies with some degree of power, there was a sense that the fairies and their stories were being left behind as the world changed. W. Y. Evans-Wentz published a collection of fairy stories from across the British Isles and Brittany in 1911 that both confirms the resilience of fairy belief and reveals these new anxieties. The introduction to the chapter on Scotland was contributed by Alexander Carmichael, a Gaelic folklorist and antiquarian from the University of Edinburgh. He wrote:

> The belief in fairies was once common throughout Scotland—Highland and Lowland. It is now much less prevalent even in the Highlands and Islands, where such beliefs linger longer than they do in the Lowlands. But it still lives among the old people, and it is privately entertained here and there even among younger people; and some who hold the belief declare that they themselves have seen fairies. . . .
>
> 'But faith is dead—such things do not happen now,' said a courteous informant. If not quite dead it is almost dead, hastened by the shifting of population, the establishment of means of communication, the influx of tourists, and the scorn of the more materialistic of the incomers and of the people themselves.[46]

Although fairy lore never did entirely fade away, we see here that modernism, capitalism, and globalization (rather than just industrialism) were understood as threats to the continuity of fairy lore. The most obvious threat that

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[46] Evans Wentz,*The Fairy-faith in Celtic Countries*, 84, 89.

these posed were to the very spaces in which fairies were believed to occupy: the forests, hills, and open waters. It is no wonder, then, that fairies became symbolically powerful within environmental activism.

In the late-twentieth century, we begin to see fairies take on a new archetypal role as stewards of the natural world, which is illustrated in media and through their likeness within environmental movements. This role builds off of fairies' previous associations with combatting oppression and the idea that they are threatened with the land on which they reside. As personifications of these wild spaces, fairies put a face to the harm caused by industrial-capitalist expansion and extraction of nature's resources. Furthermore, for some activists, they are representative of a sinister force within the natural world, akin to Mother Nature, that may *fight back* if provoked. Fairies may be either victims in need of human intervention or powerful allies, depending on individual interpretations.

This new conception of fairies has been more widely disseminated through film. Fairies are often depicted as adorable, which encourages viewers' compassion. As an example, the Hayao Miyazaki animated film *Princess Mononoke* (1997) contributed one of the most popular modern interpretations of fairies (or more precisely, tree spirits) with its *Kodama*.[47] The *Kodama* in this film have a playful and sweet demeanor, which begs for the viewers' empathy, whereas viewers may feel more ambivalent towards a character like the Spirit of

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[47] This film is significant to nerd culture at large, beyond Japanese culture and fandom. It is especially celebrated within animated movies circles, cosplay, fantasy, gaming, collector's items, youth fashion, etc.

the Forest that has the more ominous power to create and destroy life. This movie

is set in late Muromachi period Japan, which means there are no "fairies," but its

spirits, gods, and demons that reside within the wild forests serve a similar role

as adversaries to human industrial development. The *Kodama* are guardians of

the forest, similar to European dryads, but importantly, Miyazaki makes them

cute. [48] They are miniature, inoffensively naked, and have disproportionately

large black eyes.

Miyazaki's *Kodama* live in popular culture as icons of forest stewardship,

and they have even been utilized as symbols of activism. For example, Kumi Kato

writes about the 2004 cross-cultural collaboration of Japanese and Tasmanian

students who hand stitched over a hundred *Kodama* and placed them in the

coupes of a Tasmanian forest (which supplies Japan woodchips) to call attention

to the issue of deforestation. This ultimately resulted in a donation of land to the

student group, which was renamed "こだまの森 (Kodama no Mori) Kodama

Forest—Friendship between Friends of the Blue Tier and Echo. Since 2004."[49]

This event demonstrates the enormous impact that visual media can have in

mobilizing young people into action. While traditional *Kodama* lore remains a

mystery to most people who have not actively searched for it, Miyazaki's *Kodama*

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[48] Kato's definition of *Kodama* based in traditional Japanese folklore notes that they are spirits that dwell within trees, and their name also means "echo," originating from the term *yama-hibiki* which means "resonance in mountains." The idea is that "when you call out, it is the tree spirits who reply to you." Kumi Kato, "Addressing Global Responsibility for Conservation through Cross-cultural Collaboration: Kodama Forest, a Forest of Tree Spirits," The Environmentalist 28, no. 2 (2008): 148.

[49] Kato, "Addressing Global Responsibility for Conservation through Cross-cultural Collaboration," 152.

carry symbolic weight for those who have grown up with the movie. The direct action in Tasmania is proof of how *Kodama* inspire efforts to protect the forest (and thus the *Kodama* of our imaginations), while the movie inspires reflection on the inherent value of a healthy forest as opposed to potential lumber.

As a Pacific Northwest resident, I would be remiss not to bring Bigfoot (or Bigfeet) into this conversation. Similar to fairies, the possibility of Bigfoot's existence has motivated people to think critically about how humans engage with wild spaces.[50] For this reason, discourse about cryptids like Bigfoot may involve the rhetoric of environmental conservation or endangered species protection. Out of Washington comes one example: the Skamania County Bigfoot law of 1969: Ordinance No. 69-01 Prohibiting Wanton Slaying of Ape-Creature and Imposing Penalties.[51] In 1984 a "very serious" amendment declared Bigfoot an endangered species and established the million-acre county as a Sasquatch Refuge. Conservation biologist Robert Michael Pyle writes that "Presumably the intent was not to protect [Bigfoot's] habitat from logging," yet the prosecutor that signed the ordinance Bob Leick did reveal some underlying environmentalist thinking when he said, "I think Sasquatches are at least as important as the

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[50] Unlike fairies, Bigfeet are not thought to traverse dimensions or possess magical abilities. Rather, they are generally presumed to be rare creatures that occupy the world as we do. The Kwakiutl, the traditional Indigenous inhabitants from Northeastern Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia, have their own "Bigfoot" lore in the form of Bukwus, the Wild Man, and Dzonoqua, the Wild Woman. See Robert Michael Pyle, *Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995) 6. The more local lore of my childhood in Louisiana has legends of a similar hominid called Skunk Ape or Faulk Island Monster.

[51] While this ordinance was adopted on April 1st, the county commissioners insisted that it was not a joke, and that "there [was] reason to believe such an animal exists." Pyle, *Where Bigfoot Walks,* 278.

spotted owl"—that is, the species that has become symbolic of controversies over environmental stewardship and logging in the region.[52] What is interesting in this case is that *government officials*, rather than young activists, were open-minded enough about the possibility of Bigfoot to take protective action. One possible reason for governmental consideration of cryptid lore might be the scientific (and pseudo-scientific) efforts to classify Bigfoot as a species. While this has not been achieved, Bigfoot has at least received some degree of scientific attention, especially in regards to their possible evolutionary relationship to humans.[53]

Another possibility is an understanding that local communities and wildlife can benefit from the environmental regulations that are supposedly designed to protect Bigfoot's habitat. Bigfoot has become the mascot for the wild and mysterious landscape of the Pacific Northwest, and the intrigue garnered by the possibility of its existence often sparks conversations about how to keep our forests healthy enough to sustain a Bigfoot. For example, the educational nonprofit Leave No Trace: Center for Outdoor Ethics (est. 1994), which "provides, proven, research-based solutions for the protection of the natural world," uses Bigfoot as a mascot for forest stewardship.[54] Their "Bigfoot's Playbook" is an activity guide geared towards children that helps to "develop an

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[52] In 1990, the northern spotted owl of the Pacific Northwest was declared a threatened species after years of negotiation and litigation between the timber industry, environmentalists, and the government. The spotted owl controversy is the ethical dilemma of whether to prioritize the protection of a threatened species or human economic benefits. Pyle, *Where Bigfoot Walks,* 279.

[53] Pyle, *Where Bigfoot Walks,* 262-263.

[54] *Leave No Trace: Center for Outdoor Ethics.* https://lnt.org/. Accessed Apr. 21, 2021.

awareness of and responsibility for practices that have minimum impact on the environment."[55] The way that municipal governments and professional conservationists utilize Bigfoot lore speaks to how the stewardship-archetype of fairies/cryptids is visible beyond the realm of direct actions and can be utilized by state officials.[56]

A different interpretation of fairies comes to us from modern witchcraft. Like *Kodama* and Bigfoot, these fairies inspire activism, but it is not out of sympathy; they are understood as mighty allies against oppression. The covens of Starhawk, one of the most influential Witches of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, practice in the Faery tradition and are highly involved in activist movements.[57] They believe that fairies are part of the history of the Goddess peoples, an ancient race of powerful women. This links together femininity, divine power, and fairies into one worldview. Starhawk explains:

> Warrior Gods drove the Goddess peoples out from the fertile lowlands and fine temples, into the hills and high mountains where they became known as the Sidhe, the Picts or Pixies, the Fair Folk or Faeries. The mythological cycle of Goddess and Consort . . . was changed to conform to the values of the conquering patriarchies.[58]

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[55] "Bigfoot's Playbook." *Leave No Trace: Center for Outdoor Ethics.* Accessed Apr 21, 2021. *https://lnt.org/research-resources/bigfoots-playbook/.*

[56] This does bring up questions about which mythical creatures warrant serious attention and protection and which are relegated to childish delusions or fringe beliefs. This is an area that warrants further exploration.

[57] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 20th Anniversary Ed, (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) 35.

[58] The Irish Sidhe will be elaborated on in the next chapter. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 28.

Starhawk's covens resist the oppression of the patriarchy and combat toxic masculinity (violence, aggression, the rejection of femininity) as part of their practice. They operate under the core value "My law is love unto all beings" and work to serve their community and the earth.[59] In Starhawk's words:

> Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing, and to the linking of magic with political action. . . . We foster the questioning attitude, and we honor intellectual, spiritual, and creative freedom. . . . We value peace and practice nonviolence, in keeping with the Rede 'Harm none, and do what you will.'[60]

Feminism is interwoven into everything they do, but their activism reaches far beyond feminist movements. Their feminism "includes a radical analysis of power, seeing all systems of oppression as interrelated, rooted in structures of domination and control."[61] As such, they are active in environmental, political, racial, gender-related, and economic movements, and Starhawk's influence among modern Witches means that Witches across North America follow in her example.[62] They draw on the power of fairies in order to augment their own Goddess powers within rituals, which means that they understand fairies as a force to be reckoned with.[63] Fairies' history of resilience runs parallel to the

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[59] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 6.

[60] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 6.

[61] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 6.

[62] Starhawk notes that the Internet has been instrumental in Witchcraft gaining a following since the nineties by offering curious minds a "safe meeting ground Pagans and Witches had not had for centuries." Her covens have been involved in gay liberation, AIDS activism, Central American solidarity, antimilitarism, and much more. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 6-7.

[63] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 86.

resilience of women across Europe and the Americas covertly, and today more overtly, as they defy patriarchal authority.[64]

As we will see in Chapter IV, many LGBTQ+ people today engage with fairy imagery. This is not a new phenomenon but has origins in 1970s gay rights movements. During this time, the word "fairy" was derogatory slang for gay, feminine, and gender-nonconforming men.[65] The people who popularized this term made the critical mistake of choosing a symbolically charged and empowering term for their victims. Used in degradation, the term implies physical inferiority and/or emotionality ("feminine" qualities) that challenge traditional notions of masculinity, hearkening back to the dainty depictions of fairies with female bodies popularized in the nineteenth century. It is no surprise, then, that while this word circulated in the vernacular, people began to see fairies as symbols of radical femininity, expansive gender identities, and freedom from the Christian, capitalist, patriarchy in the broadest sense.

This brings us to The Radical Faeries, an American group established in the mid-1970s by gay male activists. This group is involved in environmental movements, they advocate for sexual liberation, and they practice "New Age neo-paganism."[66] This group weaves the many meanings that the word "fairy" has

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[64] There is a literal belief in fairies here, although they are interpreted more like spirits or elementals. Whether or not one holds a literal belief, though, fairy *stories* have indisputably survived adverse circumstances.

[65] More research is needed to trace how and precisely when this became vernacular lingo.

[66] Iain Finlayson, "Faerie, faerie, quite contrary," *The Independent,* (London), Apr. 12, 1998, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/faerie-faerie-quite-contrary-1155832.html, Accessed Feb. 28, 2021.

accumulated since the medieval age into a compelling symbol of individuality, self-love, and spiritual strength in the midst of societal adversity.

"An army of lovers *cannot* lose:" The Music and Activism of the Radical Faeries

Before we dive into the world of The Radical Faeries, I want to introduce them by highlighting one of their greatest strengths as a community and as a movement, which is their ability to reclaim insults. An ideal example comes to us from Purple Star Tribe in Dallas 1971 with this tune, excerpted from *Ye Faerie Hymnal*, an online collection of songs:

"We Are Faggots"

Oh, we are faggots
Flaming faggots
We are queens
We are drags
We are fiery fems.
We want to win you
By changing manhood
And start our revolution now.

But if you scorn us
Or try and trash us
Better run, better hide,
Better change your ways
For we will fight you
Until we win you
For we are stronger
Than your fears.

But if our flaming
Brings you pleasure
Come out now
Be a queen
Be a fiery fem
And change the world now
By smashing manhood

31

And make our revolution now.[67]

   "Faerie" and "faggot" are terms of endearment within this community, and Faeries work earnestly to love and celebrate the aspects of their identity that offend the mainstream. They are purposefully provocative, and they are skilled satirists. We can see this talent for reclamation exemplified in a speech made by a Faerie named Donald at the annual New York City Drag March in June, 2013, which is now available to watch on YouTube.[68] This speech took place before the march as part of the casting of the circle (a ritual practice that will be explored in Chapter III). In the video, we see Donald dressed in a polka-dot tunic belted at the waist, lime green stockings, rainbow socks with sandals, a flat polka-dot tricorn hat, and a long beard. Donald is white, but their face is painted in a pastel green color. They are standing in the center of an energetic circle of bright colors and bare skin, and they have been asked to call in the Spirits of Air from the East:[69]

> I call on the Spirits of the East [flourishes his wrist to the sky]. The springtime, the rising of the sun. The place that gives us [inaudible] and responsibility of communication. Language, music, poetry, [inaudible], I want to—bring up something that happened the other day [crowd laughs, he bows].

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[67] This tune is credited to Purple Star Tribe, and there is a note that it was later published by Proud Pansy Productions in 1971. "Ye Faerie Hymnal," *Radfae,* http://www.radfae.org/hymnal, Accessed March 3, 2021.

[68] Randolfe Wicker, "RADICAL FAERIES MAKING SPACE FOR TODAY'S YOUNG LGBT PEOPLE," June 28, 2013, YouTube video, 2:52, https://youtu.be/m-f3CO1ouu4. Accessed March 3, 2021.

[69] Since I do not know how these Faeries identify their gender (especially while in drag or costume), I use they/them pronouns.

DOMA was put down by the Supreme Court [crowd: woo!].[70] Clearly, it had been a miscommunication about who and what we are, that like, the government sorta thought, we were like, not that important [before this moment]? Anthony Scalia, the most conservative member of the court, 10 years ago said, when [Lawrence v. Texas] was put down, 'Next step, gay marriage!' Well, he was right! And he said it was one of the worst things that had ever happened in America, and he used the word to describe it—'It's just going to create *argle bargle*!' [crowd laughs, yelling out "argle bargle" repeatedly][71]

But! He didn't know! But *I know* from the sacred runes of the Radical Faerie and Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence that *that* word, comes from our *ancient* traditions, and it means *joy to all*! [crowd erupts into a chorus of "argle bargle"][72]

As demonstrated, the Faeries turn insults into rallying cries. This tactic, which Jenny Sundén describes as turning shamelessness into resistance, has been used in feminist, gay pride, and Black power movements, and it often involves the appropriation of hateful terminology to turn ridicule "into potential sources of empowerment," which makes it seem nearly impossible for an outsider to insult a Faerie. [73]

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[70] The Defense of Marriage Act, which was a federal law barring the recognition of same-sex marriages legalized by states, was declared unconstitutional on June 26, 2013.

[71] While "argle bargle" was said, the context was a bit different: Scalia described the majority opinion as "legalistic argle bargle." Scott Bomboy, "Scalia's 'ukase' and 'argle-bargle;' What it all means," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* Oct. 8, 2013, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/politics/Scalias_ukase_and_argle-bargle_What_it_all_means.html. Accessed March 3, 2021.

[72] The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, which I will discuss more in depth shortly, are loosely affiliated with the Radical Faeries; both groups were established in San Francisco around the same time and shared members. Wicker, "RADICAL FAERIES MAKING SPACE FOR TODAY'S YOUNG LGBT PEOPLE," https://youtu.be/m-f3CO1ouu4.

[73] Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen, "Shameless Hags and Tolerance Whores: Feminist Resistance and the Affective Circuits of Online Hate," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 647-648.

Members of The Radical Faeries repeatedly admit that they are a hard community to define, especially since they have grown exponentially since the late seventies. While the group was originally small and limited to gay men, today there are thousands of LGBTQIA+ men and women from around the world that are members in some capacity.[74] Although I have not analyzed their racial demographics quantitatively, white men appear to comprise the majority even as people of every race are clearly visible throughout their content.[75] They have one main website that operates in part as a directory to over 150 local Faerie circles in the US and Internationally. The "About" section notes the relationship between their spirituality and their sexuality as well as their shared values:

> Generally, we tend to be gay men who look for a spiritual dimension to our sexuality; many of us are healers of one kind or another.
>
> Our shared values include feminism, respect for the Earth, and individual responsibility rather than hierarchy. Many of us are Pagan (nature-based religion).
>
> Our defining events are Faerie Gatherings, where we'll get together for an extended retreat, usually in the woods, separated from the outside world. A lot of that time is spent in 'heart circles,' where we open up emotionally.
>
> Of course, that's just **this** circle's attempt at a definition.[76]

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[74] Demographically gay men are still the majority, but women (including trans women) and nonbinary or gender fluid people are also involved today. LGBTQIA is another alternative to LGBTQ+, with I standing for intersex and A standing for asexual. This is the acronym used on their main Facebook page.

[75] Besides recordings, I observed who was visible over Zoom during their 35th Annual K(no)w Talent show in early March. While I cannot assume the races/ethnicities of participants that were present in the meeting, it was at least clear to me that the crowd was racially diverse. However, white men seem to have been the majority.

[76] "About," *Radfae*. http://www.radfae.org/about, Accessed March 10, 2021.

In a 1998 interview, one member (not specified) described the motivations

behind attending Faerie gatherings:

> [Faeries] tend to feel like we are misfits in the everyday world, [who] tend to believe that life should offer more than the drab, rigid patterns of 'normal' life… But let's face it, honey, for every faerie who comes to a gathering to get in touch with his spirituality, there's another who comes to get sex, and another who's come for a vacation, another who's come to be with friends, and another who's come to feel glamorous.[77]

This anecdote illustrates the many facets of "Faeriedom" and the different

entry points for curious people. Gatherings held at Faerie Sanctuaries provide a

space for members to explore their identities (specifically gender and sexuality),

re-imagine the world, and build relationships with like-minded people. This is an

intimate experience, allowing members to form close bonds with each other.

Here members are free to explore and celebrate aspects of themselves that might

be subdued in everyday life. Sanctuaries also function as places of healing. Sisters

Gabby Haze and Soami de Lux, who are Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and

founders of a Faerie sanctuary in Short Mountain, Tennessee, spoke about their

Sanctuary in an interview with StoryCorps in 2016. The Sisters of Perpetual

Indulgence are a group of queer and trans "nuns" that share members with the

Radical Faeries, and they originated out of San Francisco around the same time.

Their activism and knack for Christian satire often intersects with the Faeries,

which we will see later in this chapter. In this interview Haze and de Lux explain

why it was important for them to establish a Sanctuary space that they could

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[77] Finlayson, "Faerie, faerie, quite contrary."

control, and it is clear from their testimony that Sanctuaries are considered

sacred spaces:

> In the broader culture there are sanctuaries for cats and dogs, but not for gay people. And so we wanted to have a place that was ours, that we could control, in the sense that we could make the rules, and we could establish how things should go. . . . [78]

> "As we get older... Aids happened, and we started dying. In great numbers. And our sisters as well, too. When I look back on those, say the original 15 sisters, half of us are still here, but half of us are now what we call 'nuns of the above.' When we do ritual usually the rituals will involve the mixing of glitter and the ashes of the ancestors of the nuns of the above. And they sort of get scattered in the rituals that we do.[79]

Faeries cannot truly escape the realities of the real world, but these sanctuaries

offer them repose and solidarity with a tight-knit community.

In this section, I will explore the Radical Faeries by way of the lyrics found

in the Faerie Hymnal, which I will describe shortly, as well as one extraneous

tune. I will specifically consider how these lyrics illustrate the Faeries' the neo-

pagan sensibilities, their privileging of the natural world, their femininity, and

their aptitude for rebellion. All of these characteristics build off of past

interpretations of fairies, linking the group to a history of fairy appropriation in

the face of adversity. Recalling early modern use of fairy lore, the songs found in

the Faerie Hymnal function as "weapons of the weak" and are augmented by the

Faeries' counter-culture visual use of fairy aesthetics.[80] One aspect that makes

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[78] Haze's anecdote. WPLN Staff, "StoryCorps Nashville: Radical Faeries At The Short Mountain Sanctuary," *Nashville Public Radio,* Nov. 23, 2016, https://wpln.org/post/storycorps-nashville-radical-faeries-at-the-short-mountain-sanctuary/, accessed March 6, 2021.

[79] De Lux's anecdote. WPLN Staff, "StoryCorps Nashville: Radical Faeries At The Short Mountain Sanctuary."

[80] This is terminology used by James C. Scott in his writing on peasant resistance. Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 279.

this group unique is their intersection with camp and drag culture, which becomes evident through their use of satire and exaggeration to undermine dominant ideologies, namely, heteronormativity.[81] We will see how songs serve as reflections, allegories, and affirmations of self-love, challenging the heteronormative patriarchy.

The Faerie Hymnal is available on the main Radical Faerie directory radfae.org. It contains the lyrics for 186 songs with a few songs also having links to a midi file and a written transcription of the main melody. The songs in the hymnal include songs written anonymously, folk songs, commercial music, and several "author unknown" tunes as well. There are songs that are based on Native spirituality with the subheading "Traditional Native Chant," although their exact origins or contributors are unfortunately not mentioned. Several tunes are taken from modern Witchcraft, written by Starhawk, and there is on Jewish tune: "Hine Ma Tov." This curious assemblage of tunes speaks to the diverse religious and cultural influences that members bring to the group as well as the importance of music within the community.

The Radical Faeries are loosely neo-pagan. The group is not rooted in any one set of beliefs, nor are they explicitly non-Christian. In fact, a few of the Faerie Hymns are borrowed from Christianity or refer to God. They are a unique blend of many different religions, pulling tidbits from Eastern spirituality, witchcraft, ancient mythologies, and more. What is certain, however, is that all of their spirituality is based in love and acceptance. Much of mainstream religion is left

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[81] Richard Niles, "Wigs, Laughter, and Subversion," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3-4 (2004): 36-37.

out of their practices for this reason, while gods like Pan and Mother Earth are celebrated for their inclusivity and marriage to nature. Their neo-pagan sensibilities are also a testament to their consistent efforts to challenge the mainstream; for example, Pan is not only an unbridled masculine sex-god, but he is also a symbol of defiance. The Faeries' adoration of goddesses (or just "the Goddess") is also a challenge to mainstream religions, and in this way they are aligned with modern witchcraft. Indeed, they even use a few of Starhawk's songs, such as "Beautiful Goddess." An excerpt of the lyrics reads:

> *Beautiful Goddess,*
> *Save our green pastures,*
> *Walk in fair meadows,*
> *Linger 'till sunrise,*
> *Chasing your lover,*
> *The union at dawning.*
> *. . .*
> *Smile on us pagans,*
> *Enjoying each other,*
> *Lifting our laughter,*
> *Thirsting for nectar,*
> *Raising the power,*
> *Singing your praises.*
>
> *Once there were people,*
> *Who shared in a vision,*
> *Laughing and loving,*
> *Past, present, and future,*
> *Making sweet music,*
> *In praise of all nature.*[82]

The song opens with a call to the Goddess to "save our green pastures." While it seems that singers are asking *the Goddess* to save the pastures, it is a basic tenet of witchcraft that *the people* have the power to manifest results

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[82] "Ye Faerie Hymnal."

without the blessings of a divinity. However, Starhawk clarifies that "to invoke the Goddess is to awaken the Goddess within, to become, for a time, that aspect we invoke."[83] With this information, we can see that this song *is* an act of manifestation: participants are attempting to awaken the divine feminine qualities within themselves and act as nature's stewards. The last stanza shared here is a reflection on an ancient (European) pagan past that participants might admire today for its emphasis on sustainability and communal living.[84] There are other qualities that participants might project onto the pagan past that work in contrast to the current systems of power in place. These aspects might include de-emphasizing the gender binary, embracing one's sexuality, and being more attuned to the cosmological events and natural cycles of the seasons. These run counter to Christian and professional notions of modesty, mainstream conceptions of masculinity, capitalism's model of constant growth/expansion, and the unsustainable extraction of earth's resources. Also absent from the hymnal entirely are any notions of shame, guilt, or punishment that many people have experienced within mainstream religions.

While I am not privy to the contents of their private rituals, the Faeries have cast circles at marches that are available to watch on YouTube. I would like to return now to the same circle casting in which Donald called to the East. As we saw exemplified by Donald's speech, the emphasis here is largely on spectacle

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[83] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 111.

[84] Starhawk's covens practice in the Faerie Tradition (British Isles), although this stanza does not necessarily have to be understood as European. We might also recall here Hutton's note that by the nineteenth century, mainstream culture understood paganism as having explicit ties to the natural world, which made it attractive to those disenchanted by Christianity.Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 3.

and energizing the crowd, and the ritual actions are performed in a flexible

manner. Humor and glamour are important aspects of their performance. These

aspects allow them to challenge mainstream heteronormativity without

appearing overly threatening. This is not to say that this action is trivial. This is a

camp strategy found throughout gay culture, and as queer scholar David

Bergman notes, this "destabilizing" or "finessing" of power gives a voice to the

disenfranchised.[85] In the video transcription that follows (taken directly after

Donald's speech) we get a glimpse of the seriousness and passion behind the

group's intention. Following Donald's speech, another Faerie enters the circle to

call the element of Fire (the South). Their name is not said in the video, so to

avoid confusion I will dub them the fire invoker. They are white, dressed in an

argyle shirt, black mini skirt, stockings, heels, a blonde wig, they are sporting a

beard, and they are carrying a shimmering staff. After loudly announcing that "I

am here to call fire!" they read a leaflet entitled "Queers Read This" that was

anonymously distributed at a Pride march in 1990.[86] After reading, the fire

invoker contributes an original message:

> An army of lovers *cannot* lose. And so I ask you to join with me in calling
> the South, and calling the element of fire. And invoking Hephaestus, Vulcan,
> Hermes, Brigid, Hestia, Agni, Pele, but most of all, invoking the deity in all
> of us. Invoking the fire in our bodies, that fuels us and moves us. Invoking
> the fire in our hearts that is our lust and our passion. Invoking the fire in
> our minds that is the *will* to do what we need to do as an army of lovers.
> Join me! Three words! *Hail! Welcome! Fire!*[87]

[85] David Bergman, "Strategic Camp: The Art of Gay Rhetoric," In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) 106.

[86] "Queers Read This," New York, June, 1990, http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this, accessed March 8, 2021.

[87] Randolfe Wicker, "RADICAL FAERIES CALL FORTH "FIRE" IN RAIN – DRAG MARCH NYC 2013," July 9, 2013, YouTube video, 3:09, https://youtu.be/QKFltv-8tLk, Accessed March 9, 2021.

While much of the work that the Faeries do is personal in nature, this speech urges the "army of lovers" to take action. The gods and goddesses that are invoked also illustrate the religious universality of the group. These divinities are ultimately not the source of their power, but serve to augment their own potential for action.

Just as the history of fairy-interpretations contributes to their associations with neo-paganism, it also primes them to represent environmental stewardship. Fairies' archetypal role in the late twentieth-century as protectors of the natural world builds off of their early modern associations with peasant resistance and later antagonism to industrialism. Members of the Radical Faeries seek to embody this ideal, and they have taken up responsibility in keeping the earth healthy. This is in part the result of the group's influences from Indigenous spirituality and witchcraft. However, we have also seen through Kato's research on young activists in Tasmania how this sentiment is modeled in literature, movies, and games of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, the animated movie *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) utilizes fairies in its commentary on the environmental impacts of deforestation. Likewise, the book series *The Inheritance Cycle* (2003-2011) depicts elves that keep the forest healthy through the power of their song. We might extend this comparison to the Druid class in the popular tabletop role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons, which is a class inspired by ancient druidry and therefore shares traits with

witchcraft. In Fandom's description of the class, they note that "druids are an embodiment of nature's resilience, cunning, and fury," and they "claim no mastery over nature, but see themselves as extensions of nature's indomitable will."[88] This stewardship role re-positions fairies with power and suggests that they have the ability to fight back against threats to their environment, which is yet another reason that they are a powerful symbol of alignment for the Radical Faeries.

A commitment to the natural world is one of their fundamental ideologies, and it is understood as connected to their feminism and anti-authoritarianism.[89] Not all Faeries are as committed to activism when it comes to environmental concerns, so today there is a separate Facebook group for Faeries that specifically concerns itself with these issues called "Faeries for Future / Radical Faerie Rebels."[90] This private group was only created in 2019 and exists to share information and mobilize Faeries. The "About" section notes that Faeries "in particular" have a commitment to "searching for new lifestyles" and "building up healing and sustainable communities," so they have a responsibility in "radically changing [their] lives and [their] societies from the roots."

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[88] Fandom is one (if not *the*) largest repository of nerd culture, and I am referring to it as a primary source of how nerd culture understands the Druid class in Dungeons and Dragons. "Druid," Unofficial D&D Wiki, *Fandom,* https://d-n-d5e.fandom.com/wiki/Druid, Accessed March 12, 2021.

[89] "About." *Radfae*. http://www.radfae.org/about. Accessed March 10, 2021.

[90] "Faeries for Future" is perhaps an allusion to "Fridays for Future," a movement started by the climate activist Greta Thunberg in which students leave classes on Fridays to call attention to the climate crisis.

In browsing the content of this group, it is clear that the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the following months of protests devoted to addressing police brutality and systemic racism had reverberations here.[91] Posts regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, supporting the Black trans community, immigration, and politics reveal the intersections of activist discourse on the page. This intersection demonstrates the range of members' concerns as well as a more broad concern for marginalized peoples. Political scientist W. Lance Bennett writes that today we see individuals engage with a range of causes centered around "personal lifestyle values," intersecting with environmentalism, human right, and economic justice.[92] Bennett's research also attests to the important role that social media plays today in broadening people's activism and coordinating collective action, which is illustrated by the contents of this Facebook group.

The Faerie Hymnal is thick with the aesthetics of the natural world. Beyond aesthetics, though, there are hymns that demonstrate the personal responsibility that Faeries feel when it comes to taking care of the earth. As an example, I would like to take a closer look at "Animal Spirits." The lyrics are as follows:

> *When I run, let me run like a deer,*
> *When I fight, let me fight like a mother bear,*
> *When I hide, let me hide like a fox,*
> *Learn to strike like a rattlesnake.*

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[91] I am not divulging posts regarding activism in greater detail in order to honor the page's privacy.

[92] W. Lance Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644, no. 1 (2012): 37.

Animal spirits, I am calling to you,
Vanishing spirits, come to me now,
I need your strength to fight against a common enemy,
Animal spirits, live in me.

Let my trickiness be that of the coyote,
Not directed at my people or myself,
But at those who won't let us be.[93]

This song seems to be inspired by (or possible to appropriate) Indigenous spirituality, specifically the belief in animal spirit guides.[94] While some might challenge the idea that these spirits are "vanishing," I interpret this to mean that these spirits are threatened along with the land on which they reside. The threat is the "common enemy," which we see in the third stanza characterized as "those who won't let us be." This last line draws an interesting connection between the oppression of wildlife, or perhaps wild spaces more broadly, and the oppression of LGBTQIA+ people. As Federici demonstrates in *Caliban and the Witch*, there is a strong relationship between industrial capitalism and the demonization of femininity that stretches back to the early modern witch trials. The "common enemy" is not defined more than this here, but we might surmise that they are the people in power that benefit from the oppression of marginalized groups, which in this case extends to the wildlife whose land and resources are exploited for profit.

Above all, the Faeries demonstrate a reverence for femininity. It is important to note that many fairy interpretations today in mainstream culture

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[93] Listed as "Author Unknown." "Ye Faerie Hymnal."

[94] This is one of a handful of songs in the hymnal that uses Indigenous symbolism without a clear indication of contributor or Tribe.

(including The Radical Faeries) retain fairies' feminine qualities. Rather than hindering their strength, however, their femininity is a source of power aligned with "Mother" Nature and opposed to the violence and aggression of toxic masculinity. This is quite different than Romantic era depictions of fairies as demure feminine objects for the male gaze.[95] Women, men, and non-binary members of the Radical Faeries have all suffered under the toxic masculinity upheld by the patriarchy. Goddess spirituality, which I will define further in this section, allows them to acknowledge, connect with, and celebrate their own feminine qualities rather than repress them.[96]

"Rainbow Woman" by Lisa Thiel illustrates this notion of divine femininity. Although it is included in the Hymnal, it is not an original Radical Faerie tune; Lisa Thiel is a musical artist, ceremonial singer, and holistic healer popular in the women's spiritual movement. She is influenced in part by the "wise women of the Goddess tradition," which places her within the same networks as Starhawk.[97] The lyrics as they appear in the hymnal are as follows:

> *Rainbow woman, rainbow woman, rainbow woman,*
>
> *Shining being, eternally wise,*
> *Dancing across the ancient skies,*
>
> *Rainbow woman, please come,*
> *Bring your healing light to me,*
> *Rainbow woman, please come,*

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[95] Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn," 65-69.

[96] It is worth noting here that the Faeries are made up of many different gay identities: twinks, bears, otters, etc. However, the celebration of femininity could serve as a point of disinterest for the more masculine types.

[97] "Lisa Thiel," *Sacred Dream Productions,* http://www.sacreddream.com/artist-info/, Accessed March 13, 2021.

Restore the beauty within me,

Rainbow woman, rainbow woman, rainbow woman, rainbow woman.

Creation mother, shines with moon beams
Planting the seeds of sacred dreams.

Rainbow woman, please come
Wisdom woman come to me,
Rainbow woman, please come,
Restore the beauty within me.

Rainbow woman, rainbow woman, rainbow woman, rainbow woman.[98]

The rainbow woman is characterized by her wisdom and ability to heal, and she specifically possesses the power to "restore the beauty" in people. Other lyrics like "creation mother" and "planting the seeds of sacred dreams" signal to her innate feminine and motherly qualities as well as her paramount role in creation. Her antiquity ("dancing across the ancient skies") also connects her to the archetypal Great Mother, whom Starhawk explains has been called "Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Ceridwen, Diana, Arionrhod, Brigid" among others in various mythologies and religions. Starhawk's writings on The Goddess are foundational to late twentieth-century women's spirituality circles, and she writes that the Goddess has "given [people] a deep sense of pride in woman's ability to create and sustain culture" as well as offering "models of female strength and authority."[99] The song "Coming Into My Own" from the hymnal seems like it could serve as a series of affirmations in recognizing one's own

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[98] "Rainbow Woman" by Lisa Thiel. "Ye Faerie Hymnal."

[99] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 28.

divine femininity. The lyrics are as follows (abbreviated after the first stanza to account for repetitions):

I'm a strong, loving man and I'm coming into my own.
I'm a strong, loving man and I'm coming into my own.
I feel a power rising, there ain't no use disguising,
I'm a strong, loving man and I'm coming into my own.

I can trust my sisters and respect what they have to say.
. . .

I'm a kind, gentle man and I'm coming into my own
. . .

I can touch my brothers and feel that it's okay.
. . .

I'm a full-hearted man and I'm coming into my own.
. . .

I'm a creature of nature and I'm coming into my own.
. . .[100]

Each new phrase is sung three times, making this song a meditation on self-love and healing. It affirms the masculine nature of the singers (who I presume were men in this instance) while shedding any residing toxicity. Rather than characterizing manhood with physical strength, emotional suppression, stoicism, or dominance, the song affirms that the singers are at once men and also loving, trusting, respectful, kind, and gentle. The line "I can touch my brothers and feel that it's okay" validates that men can love each other, platonically and sexually, and that this is natural ("I'm a creature of nature"). The practice of accepting oneself and seeing one's own innate divinity is central to

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[100] "Coming Into My Own" is credited to Albert at Okanagen Healing Gathering from spring, 1990. "Ye Faerie Hymnal."

being a Radical Faerie, and this idea is expressed by a Faerie in Philippe Roques'

1992 student documentary *Faerie Tales*:

> When a baby's born it's a boy or girl, it's the first question people ask, you know 'boy or girl?' From that day on, the socializing of the child happens from the pink or blue, to what activities are acceptable, what careers they can go into.
>
> A lot of surviving difficult teenage years and coming out in my 20s was realizing that I'm okay the way I am. One of the powerful aspects of doing drag is that it jolts people out of the mindset of 'this is how people are supposed to be.' We as Radical Faeries have a lot to offer our society by jolting them in just that way.[101]

This anecdote illustrates one idea about how the personal and intrinsic

work Faeries accomplish has an impact within society at large. The Radical

Faeries explore and celebrate the feminine aspects of themselves, which are the

same aspects that many of them were chided for in their adolescence. Other

people see how Faeries embrace every aspect of themselves and must confront

their own biases or perhaps reflect on their own identities. This work helps to

make space for the future LGBTQIA+ people, a sentiment echoed in much of

their content.

The lyrics to "The Lone Wolf" reflect the critical nature of the Faeries'

efforts in confronting toxic masculinity. I interpret this song to be an allegory for

rescuing people (primarily men) from the pain of rejecting one's own nature. The

song begins by describing a lone wolf on the brink of starvation "howling for

help" in a "cold blue landscape." The wolf is then saved by "Faery Godmothers"

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[101] The name of this Faerie is not credited during their clips, although there is a list at the end of the film of all of the Faeries involved. They were white, male presenting, and young. Philippe Roques, *Faerie Tales,* Department of Communication, Stanford University,1992, YouTube, https://youtu.be/8kGvAn8W-5w. Timstamp 10:56-11:39. Accessed March 14, 2021.

who teach him how to dance, freeing him from his anger and loneliness. The last

two verses depict the wolf's revival:

> *And now that he knows [the Faery Godmothers], now that he can see you*
> *Flying all over the sky, crowding in the world*
> *He got to the strange point of understanding*
> *That you've always been there, and always will be*
>
> *You freed that wolf*
> *With your Faeryness*
> *You freed that wolf*
> *From his loneliness*
>
> *Now he's still a Lone Wolf but the landscape has switched*
> *From the cold blue mountains to a hot red beach*
> *And the Wolf has seen so so many colours*
> *That he finally leaves the rabbits in peace.*[102]

This song speaks to the potentially fatal consequences of toxic masculinity,

which can be circumvented by the love and guidance of "Faery Godmothers." The

lone wolf goes from being on the brink of starvation to dancing and seeing in

color, and in turn he "leaves the rabbits in peace," which could represent ending

the cycle of violence and aggression towards other people. It is specifically

"Faeryness" that frees the wolf, emphasizing how much meaning that word

carries. In the most broad sense, "Faeryness" is radical love, and their visibility

("he can see you/ flying all over the sky, crowding in the world") has an impact on

the "wolves" of the world. The lone wolf comes to understand that he is not alone

("understanding/ that you've always been there, and always will be"), which is

ultimately life-saving.

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[102] "The Lone Wolf" is not credited to anyone, nor is it listed as "anonymous." "Ye Faerie Hymnal."

So far we have explored the Faeries through songs about their spirituality, environmentalism, and their embrace of femininity. Next I will demonstrate how their songs can also serve as provocative rallying cries by considering the participatory performance of a song accessible on YouTube sung on June 25th, 2016 at the New York City Drag march. This march ends at the site of the 1969 police raid of the gay club Stonewall Inn that led to days of intense protests and spurred the onset of the gay rights movement. Since 1997, The Radical Faeries have been the main orchestrators in keeping this particular march alive. There are several smaller groups that also play a role, though, and often share members with the Faeries. One group that is similar to the San Francisco-based Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is The Church Ladies for Choice.[103] This group's primary motive is in defending abortion clinics from anti-abortion church groups, all while in drag as "Bible-fearing church ladies."[104] According to one journalist, it is part of the Faeries' circle-casting ritual that at the end, The Church Ladies for Choice enter the circle to lead the singing of a hymn.[105]

In this video we see a large, colorful, and spirited group of people exchanging hugs and kisses as they prepare to march. The group is racially and gender diverse, and it is an incredible display of drag, costume, and fashion. A circle forms as one person yells out "mic check" in order to get the attention of the crowd. They are white (although their face is tinted green and blue), wearing

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[103] Rose Dommu, "Hundreds Of Drag Queens Fill The NYC Streets Every Year For This 'Drag March,'" *HuffPost,* June 25, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nyc-drag-march_n_5b2fb345e4b0040e274410a0, Accessed March 15, 2021.

[104] Dommu, "Hundreds Of Drag Queens Fill The NYC Streets."

[105] Dommu, "Hundreds Of Drag Queens Fill The NYC Streets."

a long baby blue wig, a shimmering silver skirt, a small witches' hat, a silver cape, and their midriff is exposed. Each phrase they shout is repeated by spectators to allow for the entirety of the large crowd to get the message. They exclaim:

> [inaudible] with your imagination to draw a ring of fire for protection, for inspiration, and for those who have gone before, and for those yet to come. It's been thirteen days since Orlando. Today I invite you to count forty-nine steps as we march to Stonewall. Today I invite you to hug fifty-three people! [the crowd erupts into "woos!" and you can hear the jingling of several tambourines. A snare drum roll begins and other drums join in. They end the roll in a cymbal crash.] . . .
>
> We are the *vanguard*! We are the *music-makers*! We are the *dreamers of dreams*! And we will build *a new world*! *Just watch us!*[106]

The drums sound once again and finish with a cymbal crash, and someone yells, "Church ladies! Where are my church ladies?" This generates echoes of "church ladies!" until a group emerges from the crowd, waving and stepping into the inner circle. They are led by a large, bearded person wearing a nun's costume, a silver wig, and a vibrant necklace. Another person in a pink wig, groomed facial-hair, flower bonnet, and a "Sunday best" dress follows, corralling the other members of the group into place for their performance. Some are in drag and others are in plain clothes. The person in the nun outfit announces, "*We present for your edification a theological treatise on the nature of the deity!*" After they are given a starting pitch, the group begins their song, set to the tune of "My Country Tis of Thee," with much of the crowd singing along:

> *God is a lesbian,*
> *She is a lesbian,*
> *God is a dyke.*

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[106] The event in Orlando that the speaker is referring to is the mass shooting that took place at a gay nightclub called Pulse in 2016. The shooter killed forty-nine people and wounded fifty-three more. Randolfe Wicker, "Drag March Faeries Socialize," Jun 25, 2016, YouTube video, 10.00, https://youtu.be/TxQ4bi67UO4, Accessed March 15, 2021.

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Send her Victoria,
Mary, and Gloria,
She'll lick clit on the floor with ya,
God is a dyke.[107]

A huge applause, hollers, and the jingling of instruments follows. This tune is clearly and purposefully satirical, and it was surely designed to inspire laughter from the crowd. However, it is also a profound example of social protest when placed in context. As the speaker acknowledged, this march took place only a couple weeks after the tragic massacre of forty-nine people at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida. This event was a stark reminder that being gay in the United States today still puts you at risk of violence, even with the legal victories of the past decade. Despite this violent attack and all of the adversity that LGBTQIA+ people (and especially people of color) face in their lives regularly, the joy at this pre-march event is palpable. The event is a rebellious celebration of their Otherness, which is illustrated by the speaker's invocation of the Willy Wonka quote "We are the music-makers, we are the dreamers of dreams."[108] *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* is part of the unofficial LGBTQ+ movie canon, which one might surmise by the countless drag performances involving Wonka iconography on YouTube.[109] The specifics of what makes the film queer could be debated, but it fundamentally challenges normativity through its visuals,

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[107] Wicker, Randolfe. "Drag March Faeries Socialize."

[108] This quote is originally from Arthur O'Shaughnessy's 1873 poem "Ode." The other commonly quoted passage from here is "Yet we are the movers and shakers/ Of the world for ever, it seems."

[109] The more recent film *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) is also significant but usually to younger generations.

its bizarre cast of characters, and its emphasis on the imagination. These are quintessential qualities in the aesthetic of camp. As Bergman explains: "Camp does not do away with the dominant society, but rather finds a say to live within it. It also knows that its salvation is not found in that dominant society."[110] The attendees here are deliberately taking up space from the dominant society and manifesting a more gender-queer world. Rather than seeking acceptance, they intentionally mark their difference through exaggeration and allusion. Fairy symbolism and Wonka allusions are one such way to mark that difference.

"God is a Lesbian" is an irreverent re-imagining of God that is also a proclamation of the participants' values. They turn God into a woman, make her a lesbian, and also suggest that she has multiple sexual partners. Giving God these characteristics contends that these activities are not sinful, but rather, they are divine. This thinking is in line with two Faeries' reflections from Roques' film in which they describe their relationship to sexuality:

> Because I think I'd been taught for so long that sex was filth... I'm going the other way around. Sex is sacred. Sex is divine."

> Our beautiful, lovely sexuality is the gateway to spirit. Under all of the organized religions of the past—Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and so on—there's been a separation of carnality, shall we say—or flesh or earth or sex—and spirituality. As far as I'm concerned, they're all the same thing. And what we need to do as Faeries is to tie it all back together again.[111]

The song is strengthened because it is set to a familiar tune, which makes it easy to memorize and melodically accessible. These characteristics aid in its ability to

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[110] Bergman, "Strategic Camp: The Art of Gay Rhetoric," 108.

[111] Roques, *Faerie Tales,* 13:28-14:17.

disseminate and garner participation. Much of the crowd seemed to know it already.[112]

One paradox that The Church Ladies For Choice (and Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence) present is the appropriation of certain aesthetics for satire versus appropriation as ideological alignment. In both cases, the aesthetics serve to communicate a message. The aesthetics of the Church ladies are a humorous spectacle, which is one way to draw people in and engage a dialogue about abortion rights. The fairy aesthetic, on the other hand, tends to function more seriously depending on individuals and context. For example, many of the Faeries at this march present a deliberate duality when they don fairy-inspired clothing with more masculine characteristics, which might be interpreted as satire. However, one of their major ideologies is that those two aspects are not incompatible. Their fairy appropriations are an alignment of ideals and a proud expression of Otherness, unlike the aesthetics of church ladies. The charm of the fairy aesthetic is explained by a Faerie in Philippe Roques' documentary:

> I was probably four or five or six, there were names I'd get called. "Sissy" for playing with dolls. Uh, "queer," "faggot," when I was in grade school. But I also got called "fairy." And all the other names were real put downs and I knew that even if I didn't know what they meant, but I knew what fairies were. 'Cause I'd seen Walt Disney cartoons, and I knew of fairytales, and—and I *liked that*. . . .[113]

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[112] In another video from the NYC Dyke March in 2008, The Church Ladies put the lyrics on large signs to help others sing along.

[113] Roques, *Faerie Tales,* 1:15-1:42.

This anecdote suggests that there is a special attraction to fairy appropriation that people identify with. The church lady drag, on the other hand, functions ironically and through a comparison with actual church ladies.

The Church Ladies For Choice composed lyrics to "God is a Lesbian" that they knew would disturb devout Christians, making the tune what might be considered an aural direct action. The performance was an act of nonviolent retaliation for the aggressive use of Christian teachings to condemn gay lifestyles and identities. When sung by a large crowd during a drag march, the tune became a rallying cry for ideological, spiritual, and sexual freedom for LGBTQIA+ people.

Although it would be misleading to overextend the comparison, there is an aesthetic similarity here to the Jack Cade uprisings in early modern Europe, in which peasants took on fairy personas to argue their right to land. Here in the twenty-first century, we once again see a group of people using absurdity, humor, fashion, and fairy (or "Faerie") personas to speak truth to power. Although their motives are different, their "Faeryness" marks their deliberate objection to authority. Singing provocative songs with a crowd of like-minded people is a readily available and striking way for LGBTQIA+ people to publically assert their rights to be as they are. The visibility garnered through spectacle has the ability to cause social change, which allows those involved the agency they may feel that they lack when working through electoral and judicial systems. It is difficult for anyone to ignore or dismiss a crowd so large, fearlessly dressed, and radiant with joy.

Conclusions

This chapter illustrates the symbolic weight that fairies carry today, especially for the disenfranchised. As we have seen, fairies have been appropriated to combat environmental oppression, class inequities, and sexual discrimination, which speaks to their symbolic versatility. They do not mean the same thing to everyone, nor are they easily definable given their complex histories. We have seen how their interpretation has changed across social classes and in the wake of industrialism, and how in some ways, they have retained some of their original counter-culture associations.

This history informs our understanding of fairies' resurgence on social media today which I will explore in Chapter IV. Regardless of whether users are familiar with any of this history, many engage with fairy symbolism in their social media posts. In Chapter III we will see how fairies also offer people alternative ways to understand worldly phenomena, which we might relate to their capacity to represent people like the Radical Faeries, who seek to distinguish themselves from the norms of mainstream culture.

Despite all of their whimsy, fairies have proven to be effective symbols in resistance. I believe that this ultimately comes down to the fact that for many they represent an outrageous joy, even to the point of absurdity, in the midst of what can feel like insurmountable odds. They are untouchable, wild, and their power (symbolically and otherwise) continues to elude the establishment.

CHAPTER III

RITUALS, ENCHANTED SPACES, AND TOKENS OF THE OTHERWORLD

Many people participate in fairy culture beyond its aesthetics by engaging with fairies on a spiritual level. "Believing in fairies" can mean a multitude of different things to different people, with practices that range from organized neo-pagan religions to simple rituals of gift-giving. Browsing through fairy-enthusiast communities online, you will see that some believe in the Irish Sidhe, others believe in named neo-pagan gods and goddesses (such as Titania), and some prescribe to an idea of earth spirits or elementals.[114] This chapter explores music's role as a means to connect with the fairy realm in the rituals and stories of various belief systems, and I will consider differing interpretations of what it means to hear music made by fairies.

I will engage with primary sources such as interviews, posts from online blogs, YouTube videos, as well as secondary sources that have documented the fairy rituals of the past few decades. In the first half of this chapter, I build off of Lucinda Carspecken's 2012 ethnography of Lothlorien, a Southern Indiana festival site, nature sanctuary, and collective residence. I consider how residents here engage with music in their neo-pagan rituals, also considering more recent videos of their drum circles shared online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Michel Foucault's "heterotopia" will guide my analysis, specifically in regards to the ritual space of the Thunder Dome. Here ritual participants attempt to distinguish

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[114] Here I'm referring to my online ethnographic work in r/faeries on Reddit.

the Dome from the regular world kinesthetically, aurally, and temporally via states of trance or flow. In the last half of the chapter I explore how those who demonstrate (or suggest) a literal belief in fairies use music to identify the Otherworld and in supplying proof of their Otherworldly contact. Here I also demonstrate the importance of place in experiencing and memorializing this musical phenomenon.

I will show that in these neo-pagan spiritual practices and fairy encounters, music is used primarily in two ways: to establish a liminal space that allows participants to feel closer to and perhaps more susceptible to the Otherworld, and as a token of an Otherworldly encounter. While music serves to facilitate an experience in the first category, it is much more akin to a token in the second. I use "token" here to mean a memento or article of remembrance. However, the musical object is often not recorded in a tangible way in most cases, leaving the *place in which it was heard* as an index of the experience. I will explore examples in which place serves as the only tangible memorial of hearing fairy music as well as examine the stories of musicians who claim to have learned fairy music, thus making it more permanent. Here I will consider their possible motivations, their storytelling techniques, and how this dynamic affects the perception of their performances.

In his 2016 ethnography *Packy Jim: Folklore and Worldview on the Irish Border*, Ray Cashman observes that among the Irish people there is a spectrum of belief in fairies, ranging from total belief to complete disbelief. He writes, " . . . we can also glimpse such a range in the repertoire of one person who negotiates—story by story, context by context, however idiosyncratically—his or her own place

on that spectrum."[115] While I will not be considering exclusively Irish people here,

I want to make it clear that many of the subjects of this chapter similarly share a

range of belief and navigate multiple belief systems. For some participants in

these rituals, there is a literal belief in fairies or Otherworldly beings, but for

many, these rituals serve as a practice with no expectation for "intra-terrestrial"

contact.[116] In the middle of this spectrum I would place those who perform rituals

with an openness to the possibility of contact while also navigating their

skepticism. In sum, these belief systems are fluid and imaginative, and as

Cashman noted, they are continually being negotiated.

The Space Between Two Worlds

Lucinda Carspecken's 2012 ethnography *An Unreal Estate : Sustainability and*

Freedom in an Evolving Community centers around an unusual community in

South Indiana: Lothlorien, named after the forest of wood-elves in the Tolkien

universe, which functions as a nature sanctuary, festival site, nonprofit

organization, and residence for its full-time volunteers. One of the residents

(Larry) describes it as attracting "misfit toys, flakes, nuts, and fruits."[117]

Demographically, almost all of the festival participants are white, with only a

handful of Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Indigenous festivalgoers out of hundreds of

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[115] Ray Cashman. *Packy Jim : Folklore and Worldview on the Irish Border*. (Madison,Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016) 165.

[116] Chris Till's other word for Otherworldly beings from this planet; video chat interview, May 22, 2020.

[117] Lucinda Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate : Sustainability & Freedom in an Evolving Community*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 150.

visitors. One Black festival-goer named Ethan shared with Carspecken that his experience in Lothlorien had been positive, but speculates why it may be unwelcoming to other nonwhite people:

> . . . I've been thinking about this a lot and part of it I think is the Pagan aspect of this community and a lot of us, a lot of American brown-skinned people have been raised in certain Western religious traditions . . . I think another part of the reason is that it's really hard sometimes to break into predominantly Caucasian spaces.[118]

Carspecken notes here that she has not witnessed overt racism at Lothlorien, but the pervading symbolism based in white European folklore and history plus the largely white demographics "might be daunting or alienating, given experiences of racism in other contexts."[119] As we will see in Chapter IV, there are many Black Americans today who participate in scenes like this, so I would be interested to know if these demographics would look the same in 2021. While the COVID-19 pandemic currently prevents me from doing this research, I might venture to say that not enough steps have been taken in the past to create a welcoming space for people of all races.

Lothlorien is organized as a collective stewardship. The buildings and land are owned collectively, and its full time residents—about ten to fifteen people— are expected to put in twenty-eight hours of work per month towards the community. They maintain the grounds, take up projects individually, and make decisions as a group. According to one resident, "To me it's always been kind of a

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[118] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 170.

[119] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 170.

loose-knit anarchy—we have formal organizational processes and all that, but we're also very individually responsible for what we do."[120]

The organization that formally runs Lothlorian is called Elvin H.O.M.E. (Holy Order Mother Earth), and some residents even refer to themselves as elves.[121] In 2008, they received approval to be recognized as a federally protected 50IC3 religious organization, although they explicitly note on their website that "[they] are not a religion."[122] Terry Kok, one of the original founders, promoted Lothlorian with this 1985 advertisement:

> *LOTHLÓRIEN* will be: a **NATURE SANCTUARY** for all gentle animals, brilliant flowers, verdant green . . . a **SURVIVAL EDUCATION CENTER** teaching the woodland living arts, star magicks, and Elf-lore . . . a **WOODLAND MEETING GROUNDS** for all 'friends of the **ELF**,' a **CRAFT** contax point and camping grounds, seasonal rites & festival site, an **ELF** council center.[123]

The advertisement continues with details about its location (near the Hoosier National Forest), noting that it is "enough space for SILENCE and MAGICAL PLAY!"[124] Since the community is famous for its raucous drum circles and celebrations, I interpret "SILENCE" as meaning an opportunity to escape urban soundscapes.

Carspecken argues that the "grassroots utopianism" in communities like Lothlorien can be a powerful force for social change by reimagining what may be

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[120] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 103.

[121] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 8.

[122] "ElvinHome," www.elvinhome.org, accessed March 31, 2021.

[123] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 8.

[124] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 8.

possible in our usual social lives.[125] This mindset is not unlike what we will see in the *online* aesthetic communities in Chapter IV. However, the residents of Lothlorien completely immerse themselves in this "utopian" society. Carspecken is critical of the label "utopia," but defines utopianism in this context "as a pull toward new possibilities and forms of decision making rather than as the advocacy of a blueprint."[126] Their website defines Lothlorien as "a place to escape the outside world, drop its concerns and masks, and attune to the natural rhythms of the earth."[127] Indeed, it is even said to operate on "Faerie Time" by way of a perhaps less-than-accurate sundial.[128]

Rather than a true utopia (a lofty ideal if not impossible), Michel Foucault's "heterotopia" is much more accurate in attempting to describe this community. Foucault himself never spoke extensively about this concept, but did outline the concept on three occasions: in his preface to *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), within a radio broadcast about utopia and literature (1966), and in a lecture for architects (1967). Many other philosophers and scholars have since used this term, which has resulted in many interpretations. In Foucault's words, heterotopias are "not a science of utopias," but rather "a science of absolutely other spaces."[129] In fact, Peter Johnson argues that the distinguishing factor

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[125] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 3.

[126] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 3.

[127] I assume that the masks referred to here are metaphorical, and not the mandated facemasks that have become so ubiquitous during the pandemic! "ElvinHome."

[128] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 188.

[129] Peter Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'different Spaces," *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2016): 76.

between utopias and heterotopias is that heterotopias are real.[130] Like utopias,

they mirror some aspects of our everyday lives but invert others, inverting here

for example the religious mainstream and the treatment of the land. We might

also attribute festivalgoer's attraction to the community to Bakhtin's

carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, the medieval carnival subverted the

seriousness of ecclesiastical and feudal culture.[131] The entire premise behind

Lothlorien is that it is in essence different than and separate from the modern

capitalist world, challenging the typical expectations of late 20th-21st century

adult life. We can clearly see the heterotopic nature of this experience illustrated

in this anecdote from a festivalgoer named Jason about his first time at

Lothlorien:

> The smell of the place, the wood smoke, the incense—you smelled incense
> everywhere. And the sounds of the woods, the people, and just the sounds
> of distant people talking and laughing, maybe a little bit of drumming or a
> flute playing in the distance. I felt like I'd stepped back in time or stepped
> back into a completely different dimension. And it was . . . nothing like I'd
> ever experienced ever before.[132]

Johnson also describes heterotopias as being able to provide in some ways

"an escape route from power."[133] In other words, they are spaces in which people

go to subvert the power structures of everyday life. Besides the "loose-knit

anarchy" of its organization, Lothlorien's fantastical elements signify to

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[130] Peter Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'different Spaces," History of the Human Sciences 19, no. 4 (2016): 78.
[131] Bakhtin, M. M, *Rabelais and His World*. (First Midland Book ed. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984) 4.

[132] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 22.

[133] Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'different Spaces," 86.

festivalgoers and residents that magic, witchcraft, and other realms (what

otherwise might be referred to as "make-believe") are possible and within their

access or control.

One resident described Lothlorien's religious associations as "Pagan, but

not exclusively."[134] Their website today clarifies:

> We are a place where all earth-respecting religions, spiritual paths and beliefs are honored and respected, from those who see divinity in Earth itself to those who regard Earth as a sacred trust to those who view pragmatic protection of our common home as just common sense.[135]

Carspecken notes that she met "Wiccans, Goths, Christians, Buddhists, Sufis,

ceremonial magicians, agnostics, atheists and all combinations of these" within

the community, as well as more individual labels such as "alternative theologian"

or "agnostic forest freak."[136] Lothlorien seems to operate in part as a reprieve

from mainstream religions, yet it is simultaneously a place of many spiritual and

ritual traditions. Members create meaningful rituals and a sense of community

for themselves by either drawing from different religions or working with their

own sets of symbols. For example, within the numerous shrines here one might

find assemblages made up of Madonnas, symbols of the elements, crucifixes,

Buddhas, skulls, children's toys, fairies, and more.[137] They embrace some aspects

of religiosity while rejecting exclusivity, fear-based morality, and rulebooks. The

neo-pagan rituals that occur here cannot be assumed to be experienced with the

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[134] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 7.

[135] "ElvinHome."

[136] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 7.

[137] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 7.

same intent or expectations among all of its participants, and each ritual leader works with their own sets of symbols and procedures.

For example, Lisa from the Teehahnahmah nation led rituals at some of the larger festivals here that were inspired by her Native traditions. Carspecken asked her if she felt a conflict between her involvement in neo-pagan gatherings and her Native identity, and she explained that she "saw the paths as parallel and similar, but with different sets of symbols . . . participants in both paths have a sense of unity between humans and the earth."[138] Lisa's last sentiment is key; no matter the religious associations or symbols used, there is always a privileging of the earth.

One resident named Braze describes his religion as "Faerie."[139] Faerie is also the name of the forest that surrounds the community. Carspecken writes that this name for the forest "is a reminder of its essentially sacred nature."[140] While in today's mainstream culture "faerie" (or "fairy" more likely) is usually associated with childish or trivial things, here the word in its archaic spelling, which denotes a sense of ancientness, is seriously respected.[141] As Braze explained,

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[138] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 85.

[139] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 66.

[140] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 66.

[141] This spelling was popularized by W. B. Yeats. Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 66. Kimber writings on Victorian-era art culture helps to clarify these two very different interpretations of faerie/fairy in popular culture. In the nineteenth century, fairies began to be depicted as female. By the end of the century, fairies lost their sexual nature and began to be depicted as children. Marian Wilson Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream in England," *Nineteenth-century Music Review* 4, no. 1 (2007): 53-79.

I believe if I have religion at all, it's Faerie . . . It's those stories of the land on the other side of twilight, and I've had experiences here . . . that were Faerie.

In my first year here I was feeling kind of antisocial and depressed and . . . I heard this voice that was low and dark . . . and I remember there, sitting here, in the dome, shaking, going, 'Oh motherfucking sweet Jesus Christ, this is like really real.' And I realized that there is a—a power as Faerie—you know, there's a magic in Faerie, and it's not so much to be commanded as to be interacted with. . . It'll come up and sit right next down to you and say, 'Hey, let's talk.' And you've got to go, 'Eek, that's really real. Oh shit. Um, god, magic is real and this is real.' And well—either that or I'm crazy, but it's okay. In a way it's real, because I'm perceiving it.[142]

In this passage I suggest that Braze is negotiating what he perceives with what is rational. He even suggests that he could simply be crazy, but reconciles this possibility by suggesting that what he perceives *is* real, at least to him and his experience. While "Faerie" in this context seems to refer to an experience or magical power rather than a kind of Otherworldly being, Braze describes the magic in a personified manner. It has a voice, and one is able to interact with it here.

Braze notes that this experience took place "in the [Thunder] dome," the primary ritual space in Lothlorien (also referred to as Thunder Shrine).[143] The rituals performed here aim to create a liminal space; in it, participants attempt to navigate the boundary between reality and an altered state. I argue that the use of drums within these rituals facilitates participants' immersion into the liminal

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[142] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 66.

[143] The "dome" itself is an uncovered, steel-framed, geodesic structure; the openness allows for the smoke to escape, but the frame creates the illusion of a closed structure.

space by differentiating it aurally from the spaces outside of it, contributing to a spatial, aural, and at times temporal dissociation from ordinary life.

In order to understand the spatial dissociation of the Thunder Dome experience, we must consider one of the most influential books (if not *the* most influential) in the United States on practicing witchcraft, Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979). I will be engaging with this instructional manual as a primary source insofar as it informs me of the organization and meaning behind these rituals. The most explicit connection between this material and the community's practices is how some of the rituals are initiated in the Thunder Dome.[144] In her chapter "Creating Sacred Space," Starhawk explains how to "cast a circle" and its significance. To summarize, this process entails hailing the "Guardians of the Watchtowers" of each cardinal direction.[145] Starhawk writes that casting a circle defines a new space that exists between our world and the unseen:

> In Witchcraft, we define a new space and a new time whenever we cast a circle to begin a ritual. The circle exists on the boundaries of ordinary space and time; it is 'between the worlds' of the seen and unseen, of flashlight and starlight consciousness, a space in which alternate realities meet, in which the past and future are open to us. Time is no longer measured out; it becomes elastic, fluid, a swirling pool in which we dive and swim. The restrictions and distinctions of our socially defined roles no longer apply; only the rule of nature holds sway, the rule of Isis who says, "What I have made law can be dissolved by no man." Within the circle, the powers within us, the Goddess and the Old Gods, are revealed.[146]

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[144] While I am unable to see how every ritual begins in the Thunder Dome, at least one anecdote in Carspecken's book and one video posted on their Facebook page begins in this way. Another connection between Lothlorien and Starhawk is that her own covens are "based on the Faery tradition, which goes back to the Little People of Stone Age Britain." Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 20th Anniversary Ed, (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) 35.

[145] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 79.

[146] Modern Witches utilize many mythologies, especially in regards to goddesses. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance,* 83.

Although the aesthetic context is entirely different, we might draw a connection here to EDMC and raves.[147] In both experiences there is an intentional separating-out from the regular world with the hopes to attain an altered state of consciousness. In the words of cultural anthropologist Graham St. John, EDMCs "(re)produce a sense of immediacy, safety, and belonging, outside and in between the routine *habitus,* conventional gender roles, or the crushing ennui of workaday lives."[148] This resonates with Starhawk's idea that socially defined roles no longer apply within the circle. We can see how this plays out in a video posted to the group's Facebook page in September of 2020 celebrating a full moon and the 15th anniversary of the current Thunder Dome architecture. This video was recorded because the COVID-19 pandemic prevents large gatherings such as festivals from occurring. As it is shared to the group's Facebook page and not a more public site such as YouTube, the audience is limited to those that follow the page. In the video, the camera follows Jef, the ritual leader, around a bright fire at night.[149] We hear at least a few hand drums being played, although it is too dark to see the players. Jef is tapping together a small set of deer antlers while he speaks and walks (sometimes dancing a bit)

[147] EDMC is electronic dance music culture, and raves are similarly large parties organized around dance music with DJs. These often take place away from public spaces, such as in warehouses, underground clubs, or even natural spaces like forests or caves.

[148] Graham St. John, "Trance Tribes and Dance Vibes: Victor Turner and Electronic Dance Music Culture," *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (New York: Berghahn, 2008) 154.

[149] Jef's role here might be compared to a rave DJ, even though he is not in charge of the beat. He is, however, guiding the experience of participants.

around the fire. We can hear other voices throughout the video, giving the impression that there is a small gathering present. The following is a transcription Jef's casting of the circle, which generally follows Starhawk's instructions but with his own improvised flair:

> Hello, Lothlorien. Welcome to Thunder 2020, Labor Day weekend! (Woo!) It's also the full moon, just past the corn moon. The corn moon is really special to some of us Spiral-type people. . .[150] We all were just [inaudible] here to celebrate the many circles that we've gone around through here. I wanna welcome you to the 15th anniversary of the dome rising. My favorite chapel in the woods.
>
> With that, I'd like to call on an element of air from the East [raises hands above head to the east] to our Eastern gate: Join us in our circle tonight. I'd like to call on an element from the West—from the Western Gate [pointing with his antlers] to join us in our circle tonight. I call on the elements and the Guardians from the South [points to South with antlers raised], and I call on the elements and Guardians of the North to join us and—and be in Thunder tonight. My favorite chapel in the woods. Glad that you're here.
>
> Seems like whenever a couple of us just are hanging out in here, no matter what, we start making a rhythm on something [renews tapping his antlers together, subdividing the drum pattern into triplets]. . . I tip my hat—I tip my hat to the founders and the elders that founded this spot, this *glorious* circle. . . Am I right? (Yeah! Woo!) Can I—Can I get a Hail Eris? (Hail Eris!)[151]

We see from Starhawk's description of the circle that it is meant to be separate from our world, yet it is not in the Otherworld either. It is truly a liminal space between the two where participants invite (as Jef does here) the elements and Guardians of the four directions (or "Watchtowers") into the space, which Starhawk explains serves to "augment human power."[152] In other words, the

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[150] Here's another indication to me that Jef prescribes to the witchcraft of *The Spiral Dance.*

[151] Eris is the Greek goddess of discord; "September Full Moon Ritual," from *the Elvin H.O.M.E. – Lorthorien Nature Sanctuary,* Facebook, posted September 5, 2020.

[152] Starhawks describes the "Guardians of the Watchtowers" as "energy forms, the raiths or spirits of the four elements" which "augment human power." Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 86. One

power is still in the hands of the ritual participants, but they invite the elements of the Otherworld to aid them. Starhawk also writes that by casting circles, energy is allowed to "rise to a peak."[153] She offers this comparison: "You cannot boil water without putting it in a pot, and you cannot raise power effectively unless it is also contained."[154] By this logic, the perimeter itself also aids in creating energy.

I interviewed Pali Gap, who identifies as an androgynous white male, he/him, and "human, although there could be some High Elf in there too." Gap has been a Lothlorien drummer for more than a decade, and he spoke to me specifically about tracing the perimeter of the circle, or "doing O's."[155] This is a practice for him in itself, and he does them regularly whenever he's working out a problem. He also mentioned that when he visits the gravesite of his friend that has passed away, "I pace while I talk to him around his grave—and wind up some energy and send it up that way."[156] While this anecdote is not about the Thunder Dome, it does speak to the belief that there is power generated in doing O's. Thus, the physical space is a crucial aspect of the ritual, representing a spatial dissociation from the ordinary world while also aiding in the accumulation of energy.

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participant reports that they "call to the fairies" in Thunder Dome Rituals, which suggests an understanding of these Guardians as fairies (synonymous with elementals). Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 210-211.

[153] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 83.

[154] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 83.

[155] Pali Gap, video messaging interview, January 14-16, 2021.

[156] Pali Gap, January 14-16, 2021.

The use of drums provides a soundscape to the "new" space created through casting the circle. Jef alludes that there is something special about this specific space when he remarks that whenever they are in the circle, "no matter what, [they] start making a rhythm on something." Jef's comment suggests that he considers the visceral nature of their drumming to be influenced extrinsically. Whether or not that is the case, it is at least clear that it is an important energizing component to the ritual. The drumming facilitates the accumulation of energy through its repetition, through sheer volume (loud enough that neighbors outside of the forest have complained), and through aurally reinforcing the perimeter.[157] Of course, it also gives participants a steady beat to dance and move to while doing O's. Pali Gap describes the drumming as being "key" to the Thunder Dome experience. He had this anecdote about the current state of affairs at Lothlorien:

> I feel like with 2020, not being able to get out there and drum and be with that community, that my heart hasn't been able to sync up correctly with the rest of the drummers and the rest of the community. I feel like it really—it brings everyone together and it unites them under the same rhythm, and you know, gets everyone rockin' on the boat together.[158]

Gap's anecdote speaks to the strength of the bond felt between fellow drummers and community members during Thunder Dome rituals. In Gap's words, the drumming syncs up their hearts or the innermost core of their beings. There is a

[157] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 123.

[158] Pali Gap, January 14-16, 2021.

sense of unification "under the same rhythm" as all the senses are immersed in

the atmosphere of the dome, distancing participants from reality.[159]

Gap told me that he has "for sure" experienced a state of trance in the

dome.[160] In fact, what got him interested in shamanism to begin with was the link

between rhythmic drumming and an altered brain-wave state. Carspecken notes

that participants' ideal drumming is "steady and unobtrusive enough to create a

'trance' state," and many participants report having experienced trance in the

Thunder Dome.[161] This is not without skepticism, however; for example, one

experienced Lothlorien drummer Chris notes that most people who say they have

gone into a trance are really just "zoning" or "getting into almost a light stage of

self-hypnosis."[162] Chris' skepticism seems to stem from the fact that he *has*

experienced a trance-state while drumming in which he lost his sense of time

completely and woke up after having fainted.[163] The "zoning" state Chris

mentions should not necessarily be dismissed just because it is not a true trance.

We might call this experience a state of flow. This psychological state describes

the feeling of being effortlessly yet fully engaged in a task or activity. In a flow

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[159] I presume that the sense of smell is immersed by the presence of the fire, although I cannot know for certain. Jason also mentioned that Lothlorien smells like incense. Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 22.

[160] Pali Gap, January 14-16, 2021.

[161] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 86.

[162] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 90.

[163] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 90.

state, one's concentration is on the immediate present, which could lead to a loss of self-consciousness and temporal awareness.[164]

St. John describes flow as it relates to EDMC as a dissolution of the "rules of engagement to life," comparable to states of ecstasy.[165] These states may give way to sublime or traumatic experiences as participants "surrender" to the music.[166] Starhawk describes the psychological state that people experience in a circle as a change in consciousness from the Talking Self to the Younger Self, or from the conscious/rational mind to the subconscious.[167] It would be presumptuous to suggest that an altered psychological state occurs for all ritual participants, but there is at least an explicit desire to experience one. Thus, the Thunder Dome rituals attempt to dissociate participants from ordinary life spatially, aurally, and temporally.

Throughout history, trance states have been deeply intertwined with dance and ritual.[168] Archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel notes that historically, these experiences mark a "new stage" in human understanding in which people sought to "take an active role in shaping reality."[169] This is precisely the sort of inversion

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[164] Berger, Harris M, "Phenomenology and phenomenological ethnomusicology: approaches to the lived experience of music," In *Theory for Ethnomusicology : Histories, Conversations, Insights*, (Second ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

[165] St. John, "Trance Tribes and Dance Vibes," 153.

[166] St. John, "Trance Tribes and Dance Vibes," 153.

[167] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 83.

[168] Yosef Garfinkel, "The Evolution of Human Dance: Courtship, Rites of Passage, Trance, Calendrical Ceremonies and the Professional Dancer," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28, no. 2 (2018): 290.

[169] Garfinkel, "The Evolution of Human Dance: Courtship, Rites of Passage, Trance, Calendrical Ceremonies and the Professional Dancer," 290.

of power that the heterotopia allows for. The Thunder Dome rituals are based in

witchcraft, a practice built on manifesting results through strength of will.

Participants attempt to actively shape their reality without regarding physical

limitations or those imposed by capitalist society, which necessitates monetary

transactions. Unlike praying, they are not asking for divine blessings, but rather,

they are attempting to manifest results through their own power, ritual

procedures, and hours of energy accumulation through drumming and doing O's.

This primes participants to enter a state of flow, trance, or perhaps the kind of

altered state that allowed Braze to feel the magic of Faerie with him. Pali Gap

mentioned feeling the presence of spirit guides, ancestors, and his recently

departed friend in the dome.[170] For some, the fully embodied nature of the ritual

is the end result in itself, with no expectation for magic or "Otherworldliness" to

take place. For example, here is how Jason (a drummer) describes his experience

in the Thunder Dome:

> . . . You can feel the magic when you walk in. . . When it's cranking, you know, you can feel your body, just in your body. You can walk into that space and feel a change. You can feel the power of the dancers and the power of the musicians all contributing, and just rotating around this hub of a big fire, a big ball of energy right there that's hot, that's bright, that is right there in front of everybody. It's a powerful experience. . . . I remember going down my first night in 2001 at Wild Magick, and I just sat there with my jaw down. I was like, "Wow, this is big stuff. This is really powerful." And it was, and it still is. And, I am so glad that over the years, I've been gifted to share a part of that magic making . . .

Before moving on to the next part of this chapter, I would like to recognize one

other way in which community members and festivalgoers engage with music in

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[170] His friend "was a huge part of the land" and passed away in 2019; Pali Gap, January 14-16, 2021.

Lothlorien: rituals here seem to often be followed-up with celebrations.

Carspecken writes about one such post-ritual celebration on the evening of

Beltane in which a man named Bill performed a tune accompanied by guitar

called "Redneck Pagan" to the tune of "I'm Proud to be an Okie from

Muskogee."[171] The refrain went as follows:

> I think organized religion is just fine in its place
> But you can keep all your opinions to yourself
> Don't tell me my beliefs are wrong, and throw yours in my face
> I go to the First Eclectic Paganism Church of God and Goddess Worship
> And I believe in faeries, trolls, and elves . . . and dragons and gargoyles
> and frogs
> And I'm proud to be a witch from West Virginia.[172]

Bill's song is a clever satire on the original 1969 Merle Haggard song,

which is a pushback against 1960s hippie culture and anti-war sentiments. The

song's original lyrics include lines such as "we don't let our hair grow long and

nasty and dirty, like the hippies out in San Francisco do," and "leather boots are

still in style for manly footwear [in Muskogee]." The song's history makes it a

compelling choice for a neo-pagan/witch anthem that takes aim against cultural

and political conservatism. What is also interesting here is that it is has the

organization of a religious creed, yet he makes it clear that he does not partake in

an "organized religion" (or what we might interpret as mainstream religion). Part

of the charm of this song is that he is showcasing two different parts of his

identity: his identification as a pagan/witch and his identity as a West Virginian

"redneck." He is expressing pride in his beliefs, which many rednecks might

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[171] Beltane is one of the 8 Witch's Sabbats, and therefore an important festival day. It is celebrated on May 1st.

[172] Carspecken, *An Unreal Estate*, 192.

criticize him for, while also demonstrating to his fellow neo-pagans/witches that it is possible to integrate his identity as a redneck with his identity as a neo-pagan/witch.

In this section, we have seen how music is meant to facilitate the mental/emotional dissociation from the ordinary world, leaving participants more susceptible to altered states and open to the possibility of Otherworldly interaction. In the next section, we will see again how music is the connective tissue between two worlds through the stories of fairy encounters.

The Music of Encounter Stories

Fairy encounter stories are traditionally an oral genre of storytelling with a long tradition in Ireland. Today people around the globe attest to encounters with fairies, and their accounts are often shared online. A crucial aspect of relaying a fairy encounter is the storytelling itself. The stories in this section are not to be interpreted as facts, but as primary-source narratives of events. The value of these stories is in considering how people interpret their lived experiences, construct a narrative, and use different storytelling techniques to augment the believability of their experience. I will engage with stories ranging from the Irish storytelling tradition to anonymous posts online and consider music's role in each, the importance of place, and the intentions behind the storytelling. We will see how Irish storytelling has informed an international practice and how newer modes of storytelling outside of Ireland are unique.

Fairies are not children's things in Ireland. They are an important part of Irish cultural heritage, and their stories are truly written into the landscape. Fairy

forts (or forths, lisses, raths) are raised plots of land of various sizes used by ancient chieftains for defense. Strictly speaking, they might also be classified as ring forts or hill forts. Sometimes "fairy fort" is also used describe other geographic abnormalities such as lone trees or bushes. What connects them to fairies are stories that frequently involve hearing or witnessing music and dancing in their vicinity.

According to legend, the fairies that now live under these forts were once an ancient Irish race called the Dedannans, whom were eventually overthrown by the Milesians, the last of the ancient colonizers and supposed ancestors of the Irish people.[173] The Dedannans, or Tuatha de Danaan, are thought to have been a magical race, or at least much advanced in the arts and sciences.[174] When they were defeated by the Milesians, they retreated to the hills, or *side* [shee], and over time they came to be known as fairies.[175] When people use the term *side* or *Sidhe* to describe fairies (as I have often seen in online communities), they are referring to these Irish legends that consider fairies an ancient, magical race that choose to remain (mostly) hidden. Therefore, the origins of the *Sidhe* are directly rooted in Ireland's landscape, at least according to the pre-Christian version of the story.

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[173]Patrick Weston Joyce, "The Legends of the Early Colonies," *A Concise History of Ireland,* (Dublin: Charles River Editors, 1908). https://libguides.dickinson.edu/citing/chicago/notes-bibliography.

[174] A. M. Sullivan, "How the Milesians Sought and Found 'The Promised Isle' and Conquered It," *Story of Ireland,* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1907). https://www.libraryireland.com/Atlas/I-Milesians.php.

[175] There are many versions of this legend. In one, they are banished to live underground, but in others they make the choice to live underground. I have also seen versions in which they are worshipped or honored by the Milesians for their power; www.libraryireland.com.

Many of the Irish subscribe to the Christianized origins of fairies. In this version, fairies are fallen angels that simply did not fall all the way to Hell. Packy Jim, the subject of Ray Cashman's ethnography, refers to them as "neutral angels" that are refugees from the original heavenly war.[176] Cashman explains, "Suspended between Heaven and Hell, the fairies are doomed to share earth with humanity, a punishment in that there is no one they envy more." Peter Flanagan, one of Ballymenone's star storytellers of the twentieth century, told folklorist Henry Glassie a similar story:

> And these that sided with [Lucifer], they were cast out also, a certain number of angels, and they were condemned to the regions that belonged to Him. And it's supposed that [fairies] were cast out, and they were allotted places on land and sea and in the air.[177]

In the Catholic tradition, interactions with fairies are akin to being tempted by the Devil. The influence of this idea can be seen in the many stories of their ambivalent, "tricksy" nature, the lesson being to simply leave the fairies (and their places) alone.[178] Flanagan even mentions that there was a prayer recited in his church meant to keep them under control, which speaks to their reputation within his community.[179]

Besides being integrated into Ireland's religious traditions, fairies also have a connection to Irish nationalism. The Gaelic Revival began at the end of the eighteenth century, spurred by the Irish aristocracy seeking to, as historian John

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[176] Cashman. *Packy Jim,* 157.

[177] Henry Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006) 301.

[178] "Tricksy" is a term that Smeagol from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* uses as a derogatory description of Hobbits that he feels are up-to-no-good.

[179] Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 301-302.

Hutchinson puts it, "guide a reunited Irish people into a golden future via a return to the exemplars of the ancient past."[180] This movement gained a sense of urgency after the Great Famine between 1845-1849, and it continued to grow leading up to Ireland's independence from England in 1921.[181] Carole Silver writes that for the Irish of the nineteenth century, "belief in fairies was a political and cultural necessity," and Irish authors of the time either "overtly or covertly" signaled a belief in fairies.[182] Demonstrating belief, whether or not one actually believed, was a protest against assimilation into English culture and modernity and a powerful expression of Irish loyalty.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland was fighting to gain independence while at the same time industrialism, capitalism, urbanization, and scientific innovations were drastically changing European life. While many welcomed these changes, the urban and the elite were also experiencing intense nostalgia for the countryside and the pre-industrial past. The Irish poet and author W. B. Yeats (1839-1922) was one of the foremost literary influences of this time period in English-speaking Europe, and his literature is very representative

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[180] Helen O'Shea, "Defining the Nation, Confining the Musician: The Case of Irish Traditional Music," *Music and Politics*, Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, December 1, 2009. quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mp/9460447.0003.205/--defining-the-nation-confining-the-musician-the-case-of-irish?rgn=main%3Bview.

[181] Richard B Finnegan and Edward T. McCarron, *Ireland: Historical Echoes, Contemporary Politics*, (Westview Press, 2000) 38.

[182] Silver, Carole. "On the Origin of Fairies: Victorians, Romantics, and Folk Belief." *Browning Institute Studies* 14 (1986): 141-56. Accessed September 10, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057792.

of this attitude.[183] He rigorously collected Irish folklore, believing that Irish peasants, being further removed from the Industrial Revolution, "had retained a rapport with the spirit world which had elsewhere disappeared."[184] He saw the belief in fairies and pagan divinities more broadly directly related to the fight for Irish independence, which he was very devoted to in the 1890s.[185] According to his romantic partner Maud Gonne:

> Ireland, [Yeats and I] both felt, was powerfully alive and invisibly peopled, and whenever we grew despondent over the weakness of the national movement, we went to it for comfort. If only we could make contact with the hidden forces of the land, it would give us strength for the freeing of Ireland.[186]

In this quote we can see how recognizing the presence of fairies is another way of honoring the land itself. Gonne personifies the land while also suggesting a divine or magical quality about it. Perhaps the most "divine" quality represented in this quote is that the land's power is hidden in nature. In other words, like everything divine, it requires some faith. Yeats' poetry is saturated with fairies and the enchanted Irish landscape. For example, this is the first verse of his poem *The Stolen Child:*

> Where dips the rocky highland
> Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
> There lies a leafy island
> Where flapping herons wake
> The drowsy water rats;

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[183] Yeats also practiced witchcraft as an active member of the Golden Dawn. He even tried to start a cult for Irish nationalist mystics, drawing from Freemasonry, theosophy, and Irish pagan mythology. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 155.

[184] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon : A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 156.

[185] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 155.

[186] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 156.

There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berrys
And of reddest solen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand.

Yeats was a poet, and by definition, he largely romanticized Irish fairies. However, we can see here that he still represents some of the fairies' ambivalence amidst their charm in that they are *stealing* a human child away to the Otherworld.

Traditional Irish storytelling, on the other hand, makes it quite clear that fairies are dangerous. This oral style of storytelling is still present today, and although it is less prevalent in the twenty-first century, it is still an important aspect of Irish national culture. This genre generally navigates belief differently than nineteenth-century writers. Rather than implying belief, these storytellers imply *doubt*. Glassie writes that the storytellers of Balleymenone use phrases like "it was told" rather than "it happened" to imply doubt about the believability of the story.[187] This technique allows the storyteller the freedom to tell a story without committing to the truthfulness of it (which could be a social liability), while also providing for the listener an additional layer of mystery.

One of Ireland's most prodigious storytellers today is Eddie Lenihan (white, male, he/him), a storyteller and cultural preservationist for over thirty-five years.[188] In 2019, Lenihan began reaching audiences through a new medium:

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[187] Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 307.
[188] "Tell Me a Story with Eddie Lenihan," *Apple Podcasts Preview,* Accessed January 20, 2021. https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/tell-me-a-story-with-eddie-lenihan/id1489656479.

podcasts. His podcast "Tell Me A Story with Eddie Lenihan" has the intimacy of being told a story by a grandparent at the fireside. Lenihan uses different character voices, gets close enough to the microphone to dramatically whisper, and episodes have the improvisatory feeling of long unedited clips.[189] His ninth episode is entitled "Music and the Fairies Part 1." He begins this story with a warning: "Get along well with [the fairies], they'll give you a gift. Maybe (chuckles). If you don't, if you... interfere with them, it can cost you *very, very dearly indeed*."[190]

This tale is about the Irishmen Pat and Ned from County Kerry, and it takes place at a fairy fort known as "the Fort of the Singing."[191] Lenihan explains that these men were *cruiteachán* ("hunchbacks" in English), and he takes the time to note how the Irish word for their condition sounds heavy and harsh, reflective of the condition. He says, "*Cruiteachán*... There's lonesomeness in that." Lenihan's story is a contemporary representation of traditional Irish storytelling, and as such, I will analyze it by exploring three key facets: the portrayal of ambivalence in the fairies, the importance of place, and music as both a part of the tale and storytelling technique.

A brief summary of the story is as follows: One night Pat is walking home alone from the pub, and as he passes the Fort of the Singing, he happens upon a

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[189] Whether or not the episodes are edited at all, they sound as if he sat down and recorded them on the first take without pause. There are no added layers of sound apart from his voice.

[190] Eddie Lenihan, "Music of the Fairies Part 1," *Tell Me A Story with Eddie Lenihan,* Podcast audio, July 13, 2020, https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/episode-10-music-and-the-fairies-part-2/id1489656479?i=1000487125646.

[191] Lenihan, "Music of the Fairies Part 1."

fairy man in the road. There are also fairies in the bushes singing (which Lenihan softly sings). The fairy man challenges the frightened Pat by asking him if he likes their music and what he might add to it. On a whim, Pat adds some lyrics, rhyming *ceili* with "*Monday Tuesday and Wednesday!*"[192] Luckily for Pat, the fairy king takes delight in his lyrics. As a reward Pat's back is cured. Ned hears about what happened and becomes jealous. He seeks the fairies out and attempts to also improve their music, but they are insulted by his unsolicited lyrical advice. Instead of removing the hump from Ned's back, the king *adds* Pat's hump to his back. Ned crawls home in defeat and dies a few days later, crushed from the additional weight. Lenihan concludes his story by emphasizing the lesson to be learned, saying, "Be nice, yes, but if you interfere—especially with their entertainment in their own place, in a fort—you're asking for trouble."[193]

The very structure of most traditional Irish stories relies on the ambivalent nature of fairies. Glassie identifies the general organization of these stories as a parable: there is a rule (in this case, never interfere with the fairies), a skeptic breaks it (Ned seeks them out), the fairies leave a trace (an extra hump on Ned's back), and the skeptic learns (Ned learns, but too late to save himself).[194] The traces left are crucial to cultivating an atmosphere for both belief (or uncertainty) in fairies' existence and establishing fear of them.[195] Pat's hump was removed,

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[192] *Ceilis* are nighttime social gatherings primarily associated with dancing, music, and storytelling.

[193] Lenihan, "Music of the Fairies Part 1."

[194] Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 307.

[195] Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 308.

after all, speaking to the fairies' benevolent side, while the trace left in Ned's case was deadly. Catholic saints also leave signs that inspire belief. One difference between the saints and fairies, though, is that the saints do not leave curses; the signs they leave are always benevolent. The fairies, however, are morally ambivalent, and it is much safer to avoid them completely than to take the gamble. If you must interact with them it is *imperative* to be respectful.

Respecting the fairies also means respecting their spaces. In other words, it requires valuing the land beyond its industrial-capitalist worth. As a practiced fairy fort-advocate, Lenihan stresses the danger involved in disrespecting their spaces.[196] While they are known for dancing the night away, feasting, and music, they are also known for their power to curse those who do wrong by them or simply get in their way. They represent a mysterious quality about the landscape that is both powerful and *threatening*. Time and time again in these stories, those that do not fear them pay a price. Capitalism relies on a model of growth and extraction, putting unoccupied land at risk of being exploited for profit. If the land is occupied by a mysterious and perhaps deadly force, however, it may be disqualified from human interference.[197]

The location of this story categorizes it and serves as its memorial. In many traditional Irish stories, the characters involved and the traces left are now unavailable to listeners, which is suggested by Lenihan's introduction, "There was

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[196] Gordon Deegan, "Fairy Bush Survives the Motorway Planners," *The Irish Times,* May 29, 1999, www.irishtimes.com/news/fairy-bush-survives-the-motorway-planners-1.190053.

[197] More on this in Chapter II.

these two men there one time…" While listeners are separated from the story's characters and the time in which it took place, they may be familiar with the Fort of the Singing in the parish of Brosna, Co. Kerry. The location provides one crucial layer of believability to the story, quite unlike the standard English fairytale that begins with, "Once upon a time, somewhere far far away." Instead, these stories are attached to exact places, and they often come with specific instructions about which places to avoid.

Folklorist Keith Basso writes that when we make places meaningful, or engage in place-making, "remembering and imagining" build off of each other in intricate ways.[198] Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* is a collection of essays that explores how the Western Apache on the Fort Apache Reservation construct places out of the landscape through place-naming and storytelling. Places such as (translated) Water Lies With Mud In An Open Container evoke vivid stories passed down through generations, imbuing the landscape of Cibecue with meaning. Stories that are tied to specific locations are constantly remembered and re-imagined through storytelling, so that "portions of the past are brought into being."[199]

While I do not wish to over-extend a comparison between two very different cultures, I nonetheless maintain that place-making can be found across time and place, and Basso himself notes that place-making is "*universal* tool of the historical imagination."[200] I argue that place-making is a crucial component

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[198] Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, (University of New Mexico Press, 1996), Kindle edition, Chapter 4.

[199] Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Kindle edition, Chapter 1.
[200] My emphasis; Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Kindle edition, Chapter 1.

to Irish storytelling as well as fairy encounter stories on a broader scale.[201] By referring to a real location, especially if it is one with which listeners are familiar, the story becomes relatable. Furthermore, seeing the location re-accesses stories so that they stay alive within the imagination. The place where the story occurred may be the only tangible and accessible element of the story, making it crucial to the performance and the listening experience.

At the beginning of this episode, Lenihan speaks to the fairies' ability to bestow gifts upon people, comparing the various gifts one might receive such as great dancing, athletic abilities, and music. About dancing and athleticism he says,

> Those kinds of things fade with time. Music doesn't. Music is a thing that lasts with people, all through the years—through the decades . . . But to be given the gift of music, that is something special.[202]

In this story, music is not the trace left, but rather, the point of interaction and a bargaining tool. The moment Pat hears the music coming from the fort is the moment we as listeners understand that Pat is having an Otherworldly encounter, which is emphasized by Lenihan's slow, serious delivery of "And then—*And then from the fort, he heard [sings]...*" Music is one of the few things that in stories and legends throughout history consistently travels between worlds. From the Greek sirens, to St. Cecelia's visions, to fairies, music often serves as an index for a divine or otherworldly event. This is very common in

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[201] Other fairy encounter stories are often presented much differently, but in my observation, it is very rare to re-tell an encounter story without tying it to a location.

[202] Lenihan, "Music of the Fairies Part 1."

traditional Irish stories, which is perhaps a reflection of the value of music to the culture. In Lenihan's story, we can see the high value placed on music clearly demonstrated by the fairy man's challenge to Pat; he asks Pat to musically improvise rather than display swordsmanship, solve a riddle, or demonstrate a feat of strength. Pat's ability to improvise lyrics not only saves him, but luckily, it also earns him the removal of his hump. Another important qualification here is Pat's continued humility towards the fairies and the fairy king. Ned, on the other hand, over-estimates his musical skill and disrespects the fairies, which has a fatal consequence.

In Glassie's ethnography of Balleymenone, hearing music is one of the main characteristics of fairy encounters. Hugh Nolan offered this story that he heard from some locals:

> And [the fairies] galloped on into Drumane, and away up the hill to where there's a forth on the top of the hill. So anyway, they started then a dance at the forth. And ah, there was the loveliest music ever you heared, and the wonderfullest dancing, the wonderfullest carousing.[203]

Here we can once again see the importance of place as an index of the story. Nolan did not witness this event himself, but he is able to relate to it because he knows the fort well. Then he mentions the wonderful music and dance witnessed there. In this instance (as opposed to Lenihan's story) they are acting as the "trace," even though they are entirely ephemeral if not recorded. This is in part convenient for the storyteller: they cannot provide any proof, but they can offer someone's testimony to the event. Nolan removes himself from the story by one

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[203] Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 304.

degree, safeguarding himself against too much skepticism; he is simply relaying a story he heard. The trace of music and dance is also enticing to listeners because they have no way of refuting it, and it inspires the imagination to ponder what Otherworldly music sounds like. I argue that the ephemerality of fairy music is a key aspect to this mythical place-making, and it is what makes fairy music a valuable aspect to these stories. It privileges mystery and continuity of culture over rationality and realism, ensuring that these stories "only exist in the context of doubt."[204] Even if listeners do not believe the fantastical nature of these stories, it may still affect their perception of the story's location, nudging them to listen more carefully to the landscape. Furthermore, the ephemeral nature of the music makes it a truly rare experience, thus it is more valuable. Unlike other rare experiences today, neither money nor status will give you access to the music. It is outside of human and capitalist control, therefore returning power back to the mysterious natural world.

The Irish storytelling tradition has laid a strong foundation for fairy encounter stories told across the world today. Generally speaking, these stories are not formatted like Irish parables, but rather, they more closely resemble ghost story narratives and are influenced by Indigenous and local lore. Instead of a lesson-to-be-learned, there is simply a mysterious event that the narrator cannot explain, leaving listeners (or readers) curious and maybe a bit unnerved. In the digital age, there are many archives of encounter stories shared online, which makes them widely accessible across the globe. One active archivist is a woman

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[204] Glassie, *The Stars of Balleymenone*, 302.

that goes by Kitty and operates a website, podcast, YouTube, and Instagram account called *Encounters With The Good People.*[205] There is a running blog on the website called "Modern Tales of Faerie Encounters" where she posts short stories submitted by people about personal encounters. These stories largely come from Europe and North America (the website operates in English), but there are many different cultures represented, from Native American, to Irish, to Latvian.

A substantial number of these stories involve music, and like Irish lore, music is often the token of an encounter. In each case, music acts as an indicator of something amiss, which the listener has interpreted as indicating the presence of fairies (and tommyknockers, selkies, etc.). I was directed to this website by a Reddit user named Fluffykitty11 (aged 20, female, she/her, Puerto Rico) who has one of her own stories published on the blog. She begins her encounter story this way:

> My family have always been Catholic but me and my grandmother have always been attracted or pulled towards nature. She's really good with plants and even talks to them if that's a little crazy it's worked for her. . .
>
> I first got into reading fairy lore since I joined the Missing 411 subreddit and become fascinated by how people could disappear in such weird and reoccurring circumstances.[206] A common explanation offered that these incidents seem to be connected with the Fae.
>
> I kept on exploring and reading about them. I listened to stories on YouTube from Scary Fairy Godmother. Somehow, I got to the point where I wanted

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[205] I reached out to Kitty about setting up an interview, but I never heard back.

[206] Subreddits are separate groups within the website Reddit that join people with a shared interest. In this case, mysteriously disappearing people.

to build them a fairy house. I still didn't know if they were real or not, but was very curious. . .[207]

Fluffykitty11 right away makes it clear that she is navigating Catholicism with fairy belief. Interestingly, she seems to see her affinity for nature as contradictory to her Catholicism. Hutton writes about this understanding in nineteenth-century Europe as well, noting that "paganism had enchanted the landscape in a way which Christianity and modernity could not."[208] Fluffykitty11 goes on to explain how the Internet is the main way in which she has learned about fairy lore and become interested in interacting with the Fae. Trying to interact with fairies goes directly against the lessons of most Irish tales, and it is the key difference between the fairy culture found online and traditional Irish lore. There is a huge *devotional* culture around fairies today, and instead of leaving them alone, people attempt to invite them into their personal spaces, offering them cream, cakes, and miniature homes. I met Fluffykitty11 on r/faeries, a subreddit in which people regularly share stories and ask for advice from more experienced "practitioners," so I know that she must regularly see content about best practices when interacting with the Fae. Like many people who are active in online fairy communities, she pulls from different traditions and own knowledge to derive meaning from her experiences. For example, she shared with me that she built two faerie houses under an achiote tree, which she deems significant because the tree was used by the Indigenous people on the

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[207] Although she goes by Fluffykitty11 on Reddit, her story was published under the name Styru; Styru, "Faerie Feathers?" *Encounters With The Good People* (blog), June 26, 2020. https://encounterswiththegoodpeople.com/index.php/category/story/.

[208] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 22.

island before colonization to make the pigment used for face-painting among other things.[209] This tree represents her connection to fairies in a similar way to how fairy forts index fairy interaction in Irish stories, and it also indicates that she is thinking about Indigenous beliefs and practices alongside Catholicism and fairy-belief. Navigating these different belief systems, she has imbued the location with meaning.

Fluffykitty11's published story includes a few different presumed encounters, and she also shared a few extra events with me personally. These involve unusual animal interactions, finding a suspicious amount of feathers, and hearing unusual music. In her published story, she describes mysterious humming in the night:

> I woke in an almost trance-state.
> Switched off the air conditioner and just heard the sounds of nature as everything was waking up.
> I live in a rural area so I heard the crickets, birds, and all the roosters.
> Then I heard humming in my left ear.
> Human, or human-sounding, humming a melody I didn't know.
> I've tried to remember it, but honestly it just blurs out.
> I didn't feel scared, it was very calming, almost like a lullaby.
> I didn't have any feelings of fear or danger.
> I felt safe.[210]

Nothing about this experience explicitly references fairies, but Fluffykitty11 has decided (and decides with each retelling of the story) to attribute it to fairies through her interpretation of various signs and signals. Music is one of these signals. In our personal correspondence, she told me about another recent event late at night:

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[209] Fluffykitty11, Interview over Reddit chat, July 7, 2020.

[210] Styru, "Faerie Feathers?" *Encounters With The Good People* (blog), June 26, 2020. https://encounterswiththegoodpeople.com/index.php/category/story/.

I started to hear whistling. This time it was coming from outside, not right beside me like in the other story. My mom was already asleep. Neighbors around here are usually older folk. I felt drawn to go outside and follow this whistling, almost flute[-like] melody. Then I stopped myself. I've heard this is how people are drawn away and so I went back to bed. . .
The melody in my ear was sweet and beautiful, like a mother's lullaby but less human, like in terms that it was a different pitch. It's hard to explain. If I knew more about music maybe I could've written it out at the moment but now a lot of time has passed and I can't give a lot of details.

Unlike in her story about humming, here she seems to understand that fairies can be dangerous, which she most likely learned from her online investigating. Rather than assuming that the humming is coming from machinery or perhaps something electric, Fluffykitty attributes the sound to a supernatural event, thus imbuing her world with magic. Many of these encounter stories operate in this same way, making the framing of the story crucial. They are not presented as conspiracy theories or religious proof; they are presented as unsolved mysteries. I argue that this is not an act of naiveté or gullibility, but a *decision* to interpret their experience as magical. Mysteries remain valuable even in the digital age because they represent a subtle act of resistance in the face of modernity. Music is a perfect trace for these stories because it is historically associated with fairies (in Western European traditions) and it is ephemeral, leaving listeners to put their trust in the storyteller's narrative.

It is possible to share the music of the Otherworld with others, at least according to the musicians who claim to have learned fairy music. This is a common trope in traditional Irish stories, and storyteller-musicians often use this to their benefit. For example, twentieth-century fiddlers such as Mickey Doherty and Martin "Junior" Crehan were known for incorporating fairy stories into their

musical performances, and they built up anticipation in their audience by framing their music as otherworldly. While the music augments the storytelling experience by providing an extra layer of aural interest, the stories also add interest to the music. Here I will explore the music of a musician active today who not only claims to have heard fairy music, but also claims to have traveled to Faerieland.

Jeremy Garner (white, male, he/him) is a musician, songwriter, and author on faeries and magic from New Zealand. I first discovered him on Instagram via #fairymusic, and from there I discovered his YouTube content. He is a prolific creator, having recorded (but not published) "one new album a week for a whole year."[211] Besides his artistic content, Garner has also published YouTube videos guiding people on how to access Faerieland in his series *Beginner's Guide to Faerieland Course.* These videos have between ninety to five-hundred views each, and in looking through the comment section, he has a dedicated following of people who are interested in accessing faerie realms.

Garner describes Faerieland as "basically an energy counterpart to this planet, and it exists as the potential for what this planet is going to and is meant to become."[212] It is reached by travelling through an energy dimension that can become available after successfully opening up five portals within oneself. In this course, Garner instructs that people do not have to rely on chance encounters to

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[211] Jeremy Garner, email interview, August 17, 2020.

[212] Jeremy Garner, "Guide to Faerieland – Week 1. The Importance of Nature," Dec 1, 2018, YouTube video, 19:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcgS1InK8oY&list=PLqEnG9O0p_XF8v0kbDYuHhd3sJa2q vYjP&index=1.

meet faeries and have adventures in other realms, but rather, people can learn

how to do it consistently and with purpose. One crucial factor in this practice is

building a relationship with natural world through intense observation and the

art of achieving a "childlike state of mind."[213] Here Garner engages with the ideas

of Opal Whiteley, whose writings on the magic of nature opened the introduction

section of this thesis. His referencing of her work is a testament to its potency

among fairy enthusiasts even a century after its initial publication.[214] In the first

video of this series, Garner explains how finding magic in the world around you is

the first step to accessing the faerie realm:

> Opal is that teacher for us because she was the child that wrote *The Fairyland Around Us* to help us reach that place of finding magic and mystery in the things which already exist around us. Seeing that as a Faerieland. Now that is not the conclusion of this, I am not making this cause to say 'the world around us is actually the Faerieland.' This is the first step. Once you see that as the Faerieland, it's such a small step from there into entering—into being able to perceive the real faerie beings that are going to come into contact with you once you start showing an interest.[215]

For Garner, the natural world is a communicative force that is constantly

transmitting signs from the faerie realm. By learning how to listen to *nature,* one

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[213] Garner, "Guide to Faerieland – Week 1."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcgS1InK8oY&list=PLqEnG9O0p_XF8v0kbDYuHhd3sJa2q
vYjP&index=1.

[214] It was Whiteley's diary that became a national bestseller, which not only contained her charming ideas about the natural world, but also mysterious family dynamics. *The Fairyland Around Us* was self-published by Whiteley in 1919 and had limited prints, but today it circulates online as pdfs.

[215] One technique that Garner teaches from Whiteley's writings is the practice of searching for "the joyous blue." This entails searching for the color blue in nature in order to become more attentive to the world around you. Garner, "Guide to Faerieland – Week 1."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcgS1InK8oY&list=PLqEnG9O0p_XF8v0kbDYuHhd3sJa2q
vYjP&index=1.

can learn to hear the faeries. The first experience Garner had in Faerieland was a

musical one, and unlike in most fairy encounter stories shared online, Garner

vividly describes the faeries he met. He is even able to refer to them by name.

Two of his albums, *The Lost Enchanters I & II*, are songs brought back directly

from "the Faerie Worlds." He describes this experience as "simply observing

them through visionary states and listening to their music clearly around [him],

and then re-creating it on guitar." He has uploaded these albums to YouTube

accompanied by original drawings of the faeries that gave him each song.[216]

Garner describes his meeting with the faerie Tolften in his online course.

After wandering in the outskirts of Faerieland, which he describes as beautiful

green hills and blue sky, he came to a rock. Here he began to hear faint music in

the distance:

> It sounded like bells. And mixed in with the bells was the sound of the guitar.
> And I was hearing the melody, and I was hearing this amazing voice singing
> along with the songs. And as I got closer and closer, I then saw him for the
> first time. And I will never forget the feeling that I had—the feeling of the
> day—the way the warm wind was blowing on my face, and all of these
> different things.[217]

Garner continues to describe Tolften's guitar, which has bells hanging off of the

headstock:

> And as you can see there are these bell things, that hang off this kind of bow
> that was at the edge of his guitar. And they were perfectly tuned in to the

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[216]Jeremy Garner, "The Lost Enchanters I & II [Songs from Faerieland]," Jan 25,
 2020, YouTube video, 1:08:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLDF2JwzWk4&t=13s.

[217]Jeremy Garner, "Guide to Faerieland - Week 2. The History of Fairies," Dec 8, 2018, YouTube
video, 27:23,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgZoNG8Yr94&list=PLqEnG9O0p_XF8v0kbDYuHhd3sJa2
qvYjP&index=3&t=880s.

guitar, so that just by moving around, he was able to play these bells that harmonize with the music. It was just this amazing invention.[218]

Garner claims to have been taught certain picking techniques to expand upon each chord by Tolften. After demonstrating, he explains:

> And so, these notes here are really, really reminiscent of what I mean by this kind of beauty in Faerieland. There's this almost melancholy tone to it. It's— [plays picking pattern slowly– Figure 33]. It's like almost sad, but just enough to enchant, you know. And, it's like, these are the kind of things they bring out of the chords.[219]

Figure 1: Excerpt of "The Lost Enchanters" by Jeremy Garner. Transcription by Hannah LaFleur.

In stories like Garner's, the trace left by the fairies is tangible—at least as much as music can be tangible. When musicians reproduce fairy music, they provide an *audible* token of the fairy encounter to listeners as testimony to their experience. The idea that music can be brought back from other realms is not new. Rather, Garner's stories demonstrate that even after centuries of scientific and technological advancements, they are incredibly persistent and find new

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[218] Garner, "Guide to Faerieland – Week 2," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgZoNG8Yr94&list=PLqEnG9Oop_XF8v0kbDYuHhd3sJa2qvYjP&index=3&t=880s.

[219] Jeremy Garner, "Guide to Faerieland – Week 4. Music in Fairyland," Dec 22, 2018, YouTube video, 20:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrYKI1HBWlQ&list=PLqEnG9Oop_XF8v0kbDYuHhd3sJa2qvYjP&index=4.

audiences and places to thrive. Garner's stories are especially successful among audiences because of the amount of documentation he supplies; he has recorded music, made illustrations, and very vividly recollects his fairy interactions.[220] His music is thus made more attractive because it is cloaked in mystery. He actively enchants the listening experience by priming listeners to hear music from the faerie realm. While it is easy to dismiss stories like this for their lack realism, their poeticism is not invaluable. Whether or not there is any truthfulness to stories like this, they promote attentiveness to the environment that is essentially a practice of intentional listening and acknowledging of the inherent value of the natural world. Garner wrote to me in correspondence:

> By bridging the two worlds, then Nature itself will greatly benefit, and we will eventually achieve a more harmonious balance with ourselves and the world at large.[221]

To me, this comment reveals the motivation at the heart of his practices, and it also speaks to the fact that on a larger scale, people seek ways to construe meaning from their experiences and reconnect with nature. Interacting with fairies in this way is audacious (especially when considering Irish fairy lore), but the process results in a romantic effort to attend to one's own subconscious and the beauty of the world around them.

Conclusions

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[220] These stories might be heavily critiqued within other communities, but within the online web of fairy culture, his content is well received.

[221] Jeremy Garner, email interview, August 17, 2020.

In this chapter, we have seen how music serves as the connecting element between our world and the Otherworld in the rituals, stories, and spiritual practices of different people from diverse backgrounds. In Lothlorien, music is used in a purposeful and organized way to create a soundscape conducive to achieving an altered state, making participants susceptible to new insights and experiences not easily attainable in everyday life. The ritual space itself is crucial to the experience as the circle-casting attempts to establish a spacial, temporal, and aural dissociation. Physical space is also important in the remembering and retelling of traditional Irish fairy stories. It serves as the memorial of the experience once the traces left by fairies are no longer accessible. In these stories, music is used as an identifier of fairy activity. It serves as a sign and warning to listeners that an Otherworldly event is taking place. While these traditional stories are a huge influence on the fairy lore online, many people today (especially outside of Ireland) purposefully seek out fairies. These encounter stories are disseminated across the Internet through various websites and social media applications, creating interest and curiosity among a widespread audience for fairy lore. Music is the ideal way to identify the presence of fairies because of its ephemerality, its historical associations with fairy worlds, and its sense of mystery when its source remains invisible. When musican-storytellers reproduce the music of their fairy encounter, they augment the believability of their story. In turn, they also add value to their music outside of capitalist worth by presenting it as a token of the Otherworld.

What all of these stories suggest is that in today's world, people still have a need for mystery and escaping the constraints of reality. The Internet has been

one useful tool in introducing these alternative ways of experiencing the world to a widespread audience, and then (perhaps ironically), leading them to a more attentive and purposeful relationship with the landscape around them. Because many people are no longer required to be immersed in nature and interact with the nature regularly, people are seeking out new ways to rebuild that relationship and consider alternative bodies of knowledge. Fairy music remains just elusive enough to draw people into these stories and engage their listening, and it speaks to the value of the unknown.

CHAPTER IV

"SOMETHING OF FANTASY THAT'S REFLECTIVE OF OUR ACTUAL

WORLD:" IDENTITY, HETEROTOPIAS, AND MUSIC IN AESTHETIC PLAY

Today it is easier than ever to find "your people." Participants in fringe

subcultures can find and connect with friends or "mutuals" nearly

instantaneously due to the prevalence of Internet access combined with the

convenience of social media applications on cell phones.[222] Through the use of

hashtags (#), users are able to contribute their posts to a "larger body of

practice," which is searchable by anyone interested in that particular subject.[223]

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how participants in fantasy-inspired aesthetic

cultures on the social media applications Instagram and TikTok engage in a form

of "serious play" by constructing their identities within these alternative styles. [224]

Serious play, in this case, is at once entertainment and a form of social

commentary. Furthermore, I will analyze how music aids in users' ability to

successfully perform in aesthetic genres. Musicians that don certain aesthetics

are able to provide the soundscapes for these niche online communities, and

participants use music to strengthen their identification with these aesthetics.

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[222] "Mutuals" are Internet friends with similar interests. Mutuals often promote their friends' content and communicate regularly online.

[223] Andrew Peck, "Capturing the Slender Man: Online and Offline Vernacular Practice in the Digital Age," *Cultural Analysis* 16, no. 1 (2017): 33.

[224] Hans Skott-Myhre, "Serious Play: Young People's Deployment of Culturally Subversive Sign Within Postmodern Capitalism," In *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2015), 797

I will begin by briefly explaining the allowances of each social media application before providing a thick description of the posts found under the hashtags fairycore and goblincore/gremlincore on both Instagram and TikTok. I will then critically analyze this content to show how it engages in social critique through their intersections with race, gender, sexuality, nature, and the romanticization of a pre-industrial past. I will show that what might appear to cultural outsiders as simply cosplay or outrageous stylings is often a differentiated and complex form of protest against gender norms, the repression of marginalized sexual orientations, and industrial capitalism.

Instagram advertises itself as an application that "[Brings] you closer to the people and things you love."[225] According to one statistic, one billion people used Instagram every month in 2019, with 63% of users logging in at least once per day.[226] It is hugely popular among young people, specifically Gen Z (although not exclusively), especially as an alternative to Instagram's owner Facebook.[227] The distinguishing factor between Instagram and Facebook is that Instagram is exclusively for photo and video sharing.[228] Another differentiating factor between the two applications is that instead of having "friends," Instagram users' posts are seen by their followers, whom they may or may not "follow" back. Users can

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[225] This is the first message on the "About" section of Instagram's website on December 11, 2020.

[226] Christina Newberry, "37 Instagram Stats That Matter to Marketers in 2020," Hootsuite, October 22, 2019, https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/#:~:text=Instagram%20will%20reach%20112.5%20million,million%20U.S.%20users%20in%202021.

[227] Gen Z is generally defined as those born between 1997 and 2012-2015.

[228] Users can get around this requirement by sharing photos of text. Additionally, Instagram's Story feature allows users to type words against a backdrop without including a photo.

adjust their settings so that either *anyone* can follow them or other users *request* to follow. This allows people to easily gain access to content shared by celebrities, politicians, businesses, organizations, and artists by simply following their profiles. An advantage to this app in particular is that Instagram allows users to create multiple accounts, enabling people to have both personal accounts, accounts for promoting their businesses, and maybe even a "finsta" account, short for "fake instagram".[229]

When users open the app they scroll through pictures and videos, and they have the option to like (by double tapping, giving the post a heart), comment, or send posts in a direct message to anyone else. The order in which posts are presented is dependent on Instagram's algorithm, which in 2020 takes into account the relationship between users (interaction history), the type of post, and how recently it was published.[230] Users can also subscribe to popular hashtags, so that public posts published under these hashtags show up on their feed. I have used this feature in my online ethnographic work by subscribing to #fairycore and #goblincore. While this is feature has been incredibly helpful, one limitation here is that it favors the best performing posts under this hashtag, and the less popular posts fall through the cracks in my feed. This issue exists among almost every popular social media application, and it can be frustrating for ethnographers, artists, and regular users alike.

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[229] These accounts are usually designed for a more private audience, allowing users to post more candid and satirical content that would seem inappropriate on their accounts linked with their public identities.

[230] Paige Cooper, "How the Instagram Algorithm Works in 2020 (And How to Work With It," Hootsuite, April 20, 2020. https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-algorithm/.

By using the search tool on Instagram, I can search "fairycore" under "Tags" and see that there are 237K posts within this collection as of December 2020 (Figure 2 & 3). The order that I see posts is based on Instagram's algorithm (my relationship to these users, the type of post, and how recently they were posted). Many of the top images were posted within the last twenty-four hours.
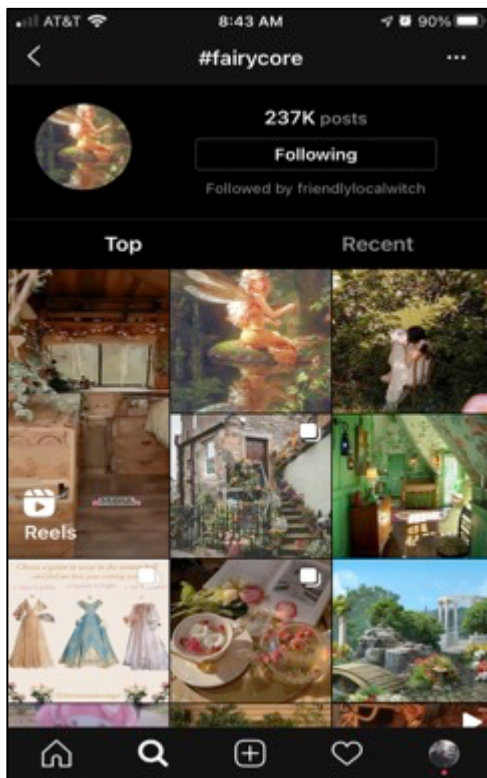

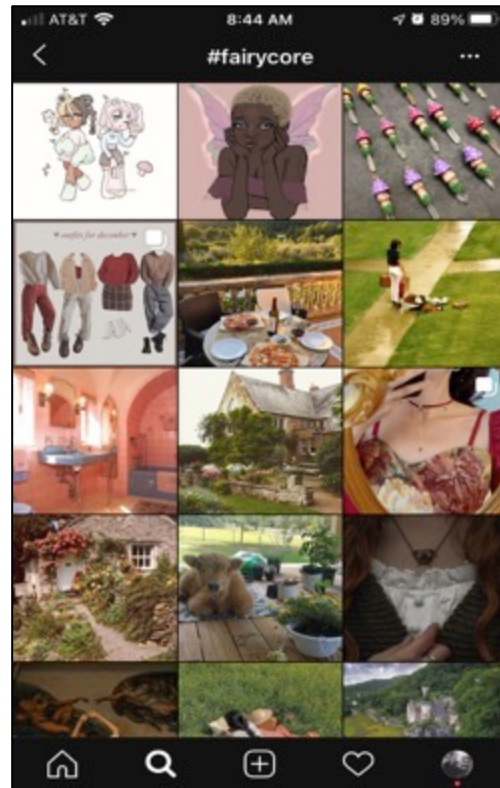Figure 2 : The top posts for #fairycore, December 12, 2020

Figure 3 : Approximately the 10th results page, December 12, 2020

I interpret subgenres like fairycore and goblincore as distinct iterations of punk aesthetics. These subgenres offer different access points to punk aside from the "hardcore" aesthetic of the late twentieth century.[231] Scrolling through these

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[231] The "core" ending to these aesthetic subgenres derives from hardcore, an aggressive style of rock or punk music.

public posts, several themes emerge. Lacy dresses, overgrown gardens, pointy

ears, cottage architecture, tea sets, fairy wings, rustically presented baked goods,

books, and animals.[232] Many people also tag fairycore along with tags such as

#cottagecore, #fairykei (popular in Japan), #softcore, and #grandmacore, which

all qualify as "alternative" styles and aesthetics even though they are often a far

cry from the punk stylings of the 1980s-90s.

Cottagecore is the most popular of all of these

subgenres, and in many ways it is similar to

fairycore. I will discuss cottagecore more in the

next section, but in sum, it romanticizes pre-

modern agricultural living. Fairycore is more

inclined to feature medieval imagery than

cottagecore, and it importantly includes

allusions to magic and pointy ears. Pastel pinks,

lavender, and green are the dominating colors

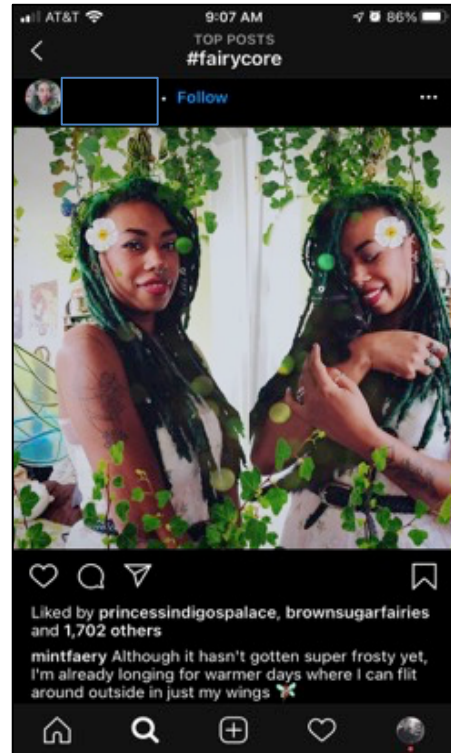in these images, and they overwhelmingly

Figure 4: Screenshot 1

feature women. While thin white women make up the largest demographic in the

most popular images, there are a number of Black and Asian (most commonly

Japanese) women, nonbinary people, and transgender people who perform

within these subcultures. It is more difficult to find Latina women, Indigenous

women, and male artists and performers. I will address race and gender

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[232] The most popular animals (based on my anecdotal observations) are cats, butterflies, bunnies, frogs, and cows. More important than the species is their level of cuteness; animals that are young or wearing hats generally perform well.

representation further in my analysis. The following nine screenshots are an

assemblage of images that I feel represent the range of content within #fairycore.
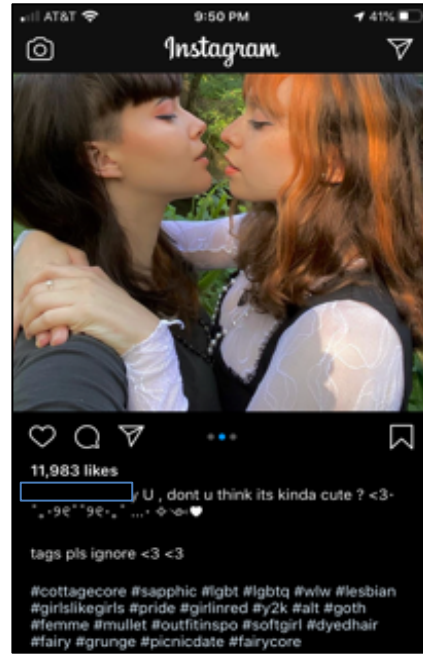

Figure 5: Screenshot 2

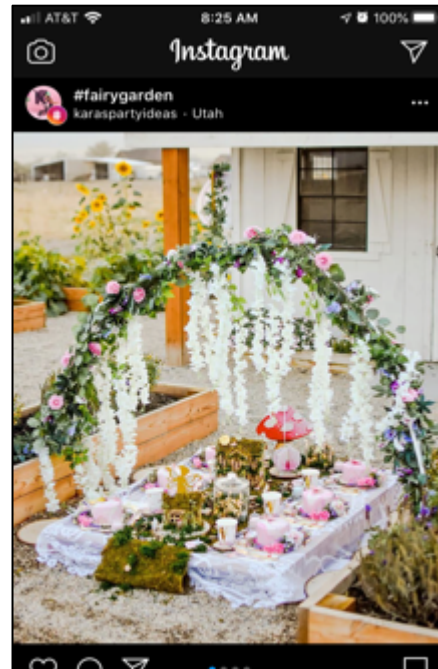Figure 6: Screenshot 3

Figure 7: Screenshot 4

Figure 8: Screenshot 5

Figure 9: Screenshot 6

Figure 10: Screenshot 7

Figure 11: Screenshot 8

Figure 12: Screenshot 9

As you can see in Figures 5 and 10, it is not uncommon for fairycore content to feature instruments and music. In Figure 6, the subject of the photo and content creator @ginaxanadu, or Gina Xana, identifies as a Black German woman (she/her).[233] She is sitting on orange-brown fur, holding a torch in her left hand and a lyre in her right. Burnt-orange and beige flowers are folded into her hair, crown, and the tops of her sleeves. She wears a large tooth necklace, several rings, a nose piercing, and has a triangle symbol lightly drawn onto her forehead. The lyre is decorative, which serves to associate Xana's visual performance with the Gaelic (or Celtic) pagan traditions and customs. The photograph, costuming, and makeup seem to be of a professional quality, and the image's caption reads:

> **ginaxanadu**: (*fern emoji) Wheel [of] the year collaboration (*fern emoji)
>
> IMBOLC
>
> Imbolc of Brigid's Day marks the beginning of Spring and the stirrings of new life and plants. IT is the promise of renewal, of earth awakening and life-force stirring. We welcome the growth of the returning light and witness Life's insatiable appetite for rebirth.
> Fire played an integral part of the celebrations, to offer protection and growth, as a symbol of the sun's return.
> At Imbolc we honor Brigid, the Goddess of spring, fire and creativity (*fire emoji).
> Please have a look at these amazing ladies who did this wonderful collaboration with me (*heart emoji, *fern emoji):
>
> Ostara: @mothmagick
> Beltane: @dea.hariasa
> Litha: @auri.daer
> Lughnasadh: @folklori_
> Manon: @faerynthorn
> Samhain: @michellenicoletiley
> Yule: @manicmoth
> Necklace by @vespermoth

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[233] I arrived at this information by scrolling through her account bio and more of her content, where she refers to herself as Black.

Outfit by @blackunicorndesigns

Figure 10 differs from Figure 5 because the instrument is serving a performance function. The performer @yidneth, or Priscilla Hernandez (she/her), is a professional musician and illustrator from Spain.[234] In this video we see a white woman with long, curly blonde hair in a forest green dress and matching witch's hat playing a large tin whistle. As she plays a brief tune in C natural minor, she is sitting on the forest floor next to a mossy, vine-covered tree. The video is less than twenty seconds long. Her caption reads:

> **yidneth**: Playing for the fairies. Just earlier on today... Still green reigns but ferns and leaves are turning. Collected the last berries of the season and said farewell to Summer. I always bring a flute with me so I always feel like a minstrel playing for the fairies, the wee folk. This was just today and improvised on the spot after last golden rays shone upon the changing leaves
>
> Recorded right on my phone
> Longer version soon
>
> Hat by @costureroreal
> (Use promo code: yidneth for discount)
> #flutemusic #relaxingsounds #goblincore #fairycore #incantations #yidneth #witchylife #bard #inthewoods #summerending #witchhat #hedgewitch

On the application TikTok, music is most commonly used in a different way than on Instagram. The posts on TikTok (usually referred to as "tiktoks") are made up of short clips between 3 to 60 seconds either filmed all at once or in short snippets, which the app conveniently links together for users. While the videos can record live sounds, many users add a layer of sound/music on top of their video that corresponds with the video's content. The app's users are

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[234] I arrived at this information through her account bio and the link to her website.

notorious for amateur dance videos (often *very impressive* amateur dancing) with an added layer of music and text on top of the videos. This combination of control over music, visual content, and text allows for users to easily construct a carefully crafted film, like a miniature *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

Like Instagram, users on TikTok "follow" other users in order to regularly see their content. However, TikTok's algorithm also shows users videos outside of the accounts they follow. This algorithm is dependent on which hashtags are linked to each video, which inform the app of the subject matter a user is interested in. From there, the algorithm "pushes" videos based on what type of content users watch to completion, which subject matter they engage with frequently, and the account/device settings (location, language preference).[235] Similar to Instagram, it is extremely easy to find the best performing videos (taking into account likes, comments, shares), but a deeper dive is needed in order to find less popular videos. Another limitation on TikTok is that you are unable to message users unless they follow you back. In order to get in touch with TikTok users, I messaged them directly on Instagram instead.

The fairycore content on TikTok is similar in many ways to what is found on Instagram, although users tend to be younger and there are fewer professionals promoting their work. With that said, I will be describing the subgenre goblincore/gremlincore on this application. Goblincore and gremlincore are essentially the same aesthetic genre, but there has recently been a move away from the term "goblin" due to the mythical creature's roots as an

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[235] Masooma Memon, "How the TikTok Algorithm Works in 2020 (and How to Work With It," Hootsuite, July 29, 2020, https://blog.hootsuite.com/tiktok-algorithm/.

anti-Semitic caricature. Therefore, "gremlin" has been a popular substitute for many users, along with dragoncore, corvidcore, and vultureculture. It is also true that many users use all of these hashtags at once in order to reach the largest potential audience. Still, #goblincore remains the most popular among all of these (Figure 13-14).
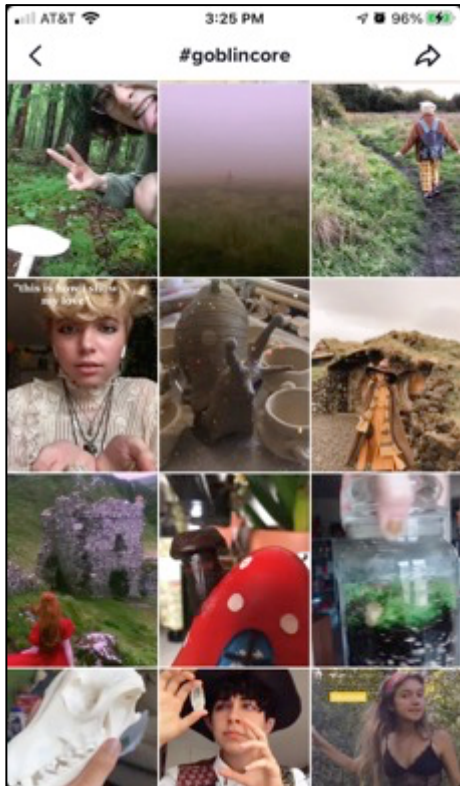

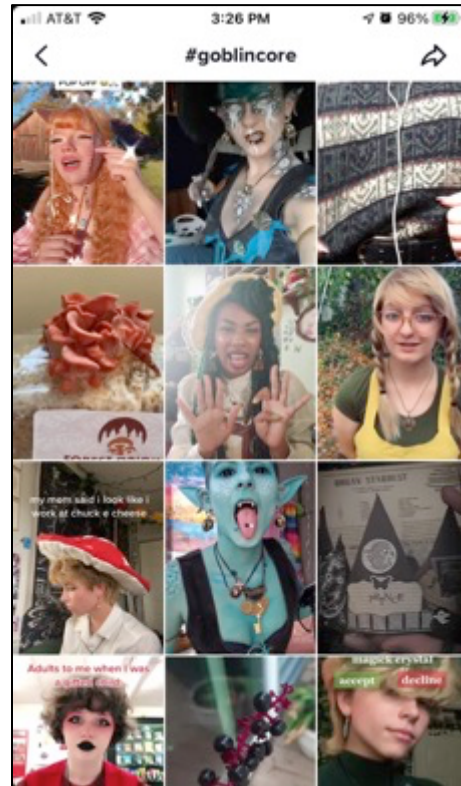Figure 13: Goblincore results on Tiktok, December 14, 2020

Figure 14: Second page of goblincore results on Tiktok, December 14, 2020

To find goblincore/gremlincore content directly, users can use TikTok's search bar under the "Hashtags" option, and there they will find an alternative to the already alternative fairycore. Instead of pastel pinks and lavenders, the color schemes are generally made up of forest green, browns, and bright reds (almost always from mushroom caps). The people in these videos are very often clad in sweaters, high-wasted and cuffed pants, thick socks, and there tends to be a

thrifted and oversized quality about most of their outfits. Like fairycore, there are

many pointy ears, videos shot in the woods or in gardens, and plenty of

charismatic hair colors and makeup jobs. However, goblincore is distinctly dirtier

than fairycore. Other themes that emerge as you scroll through these videos

include a love that verges on obsession with frogs and toads, bones, small

collections of found items, glass jars, and mushrooms.

Throughout this chapter, it is important to note which hashtags users

choose for their posts. Their choice of hashtags reveals in part how they identify

their content, how they want their content to be interpreted by others, the

audience they are attempting to reach, and how they are using the algorithm

strategically to boost their content. Some users will try to reach a wide audience

by tagging #goblincore, #gremlincore, and other similar aesthetic subgenres all

at once. Others will use popular and relevant tags on TikTok more broadly, such

as Figure 15's use of #algorithm and #blm, which were used frequently in

Summer 2020 to make sure important Black Lives Matter content was widely

disseminated. Creators will also often tag marginalized aspects of their identity as

a display of pride and unity. For example, #nonbinary or #enby (slang for NB, or

nonbinary) is a very popular tag in goblincore content, which means it

intertwines with other content aimed at nonbinary users.[236] Thus, nonbinary

users are more likely to be exposed to the culture, find it inviting, and participate

in it. Black goblincore creators often use tags such as #blackalt,

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[236] None of the following four examples use this tag, regrettably, but Taj in the next section does use it on Instagram. Fairies have been historically associated with androgyny (although they started to be feminized in the nineteenth century), making them an excellent choice for aesthetic performances for nonbinary people.

#blackalternative, and #supportblackcreators. These hashtags create archives within the subgenre specifically for Black representation, and they create a sense of community among Black participants. For marginalized voices, it is especially important to boost the content of "mutuals" by liking, commenting, and sharing their posts.

In the next section, I will present four examples of goblincore performances before moving on to my analysis. These examples serve represent the diverse range of content within goblincore, and their popularity illustrates their approval within the community. My analysis consists of three sections, each reflecting an important aspect of these subgenres: identity (race, gender, sexual orientation), the heterotopic presentation of the natural world, and the use of music to create these heterotopias.

Four Variations on Goblincore

The popularity of these four examples suggests that they serve as aesthetic role models to users. The first example is political in nature, which demonstrates how goblincore performances do not exist in a vacuum; they often intersect with other aspects of users' lives. The second example also speaks to the cultural moment, although it is satirical. This post uses a popular song by Lizzo to comment on goblincore's obsession with frogs. The third post is an example of aesthetic roleplaying. It presents like a short love chronicle set in a gremlincore fantasy while also making a subtle reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth post is a guide to the subgenre faepunk, illustrating how users thoughtfully construct and categorize their own fantasy universes by combining their favorite aspects

from others.

Political tiktoks, especially in 2020, are not at all uncommon. The

generation of youth that makes up the majority of users, Generation Z ("Gen Z"),

born between 1997-2012/2015,[237] has a reputation for politically organizing over

social media applications,[238] and TikTok is one of the major places where ideas

are generated and disseminated among this age group. In the following example

(Figure 14), a user's goblincore performance is doubling as a message to Black

Lives Matter protesters. I have censored their face and username since their

profile reveals that they are a minor.

The video in Figure 15 is one

continuous clip of the user speaking while

videoing their outfit through the mirror. The

user is white, English, their pronouns are

they/he,[239] and they have short black hair.

They are wearing a thick patterned sweater

over a collared shirt, light brown corduroy

pants belted high at the waist, and a green

paisley bandana. The interesting
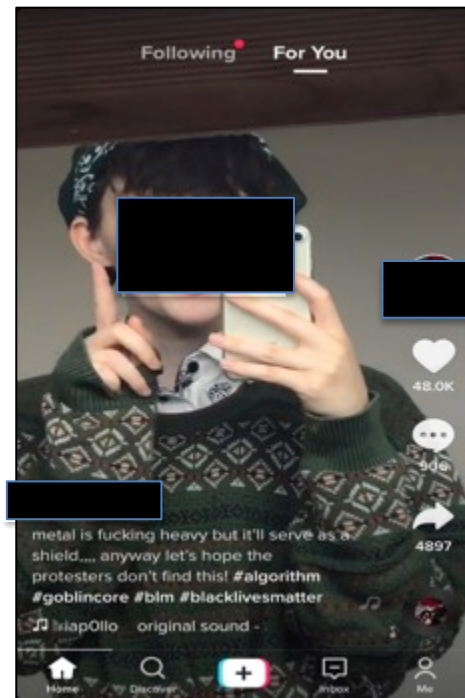
contradiction of this video is that while they

Figure 15: Goblincore and Black Lives
Matter

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[237] These dates are not entirely agreed upon across the Internet, but it is generally agreed that Gen Z people are currently under 23-25 years old in 2020.

[238] For instance, in the running up to the 2020 presidential election, K-pop fans (a culture in and of itself) reserved hundreds of seats in a Tulsa arena for a Trump rally with the intention of not showing up. This successful direct action left the arena much emptier than expected by the Trump team.

[239] This information was gleamed from another one of their videos in which they explicitly stated (through layered text) that they are from England, and their preferred pronouns are in their bio.

are smiling sweetly and showing off their outfit, they are simultaneously speaking

about a serious strategy to counter police violence at protests. Consider this

transcription of their audio, the video's caption, and the sound/music as it is

displayed:

> **Figure 15 user:** Er it sure would be a shame if the protesters figured out
> that they need to make their signs out of metal—but paint them so that the
> cops don't know they're made out of metal—Um... So that when they get
> shot with rubber bullets, they can defend themself [sic.] with the piece of
> metal and they don't get hurt bad because the rubber bullets are fucking
> huge, and they're not even completely rubber—they're just metal, covered
> in a slight coating of rubber? (Looks directly into camera) It sure would be
> a shame if protesters knew to make their signs out of metal though.
>
> **Figure 15 User's Caption**
> metal is fucking heavy but it'll serve as a shield,,,, anyway let's hope the
> protesters don't find this! #algorithm #goblincore #blm #blacklivesmatter
>
> ♫ **original sound – [user's handle]²⁴⁰**

This tiktok speaks to how the Black Lives Matter movement had

reverberations throughout every facet of daily life in the wake of George Floyd's

murder on May 25, 2020. There is less escapism than one might expect in these

subgenres; rather, users create and model the kind of world they would like to see

realized. Within this content, users (especially the young ones) have more control

than they do in most facets of life. This user takes advantage of their platform in

aesthetic subgenres to relay tactical advice to protesters and subvert the power of

the police.

While this goblincore performance had serious undertones, many

goblincore videos are designed with an exaggerated sense of ridiculousness. Take

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240 Since users have the option to layer sound/music on top of their video, there is always an audio
source displayed, even if it's an original audio recorded by the user. From there, other users can
use other people's audios for their own videos.

for instance this video (Figure 16) showcasing various frogs and toads to the music of hip hop star Lizzo's "Boys."

Since the user who created this video is a minor, I am leaving her anonymous. However, the creator did tell me that she is a girl from Russia (she/her). In this song, Lizzo is illustrating the fact that she likes men of every variety. The video is presented as a sort of slideshow of images, with each new picture of a frog or toad arriving at the end of Lizzo's phrases. The content is designed to demonstrate the user's intense love for these animals, a crucial aspect to identifying as "goblincore." A transcription of the lyrics as they appear in the video, the caption, and the sound/music source as displayed is as follows:
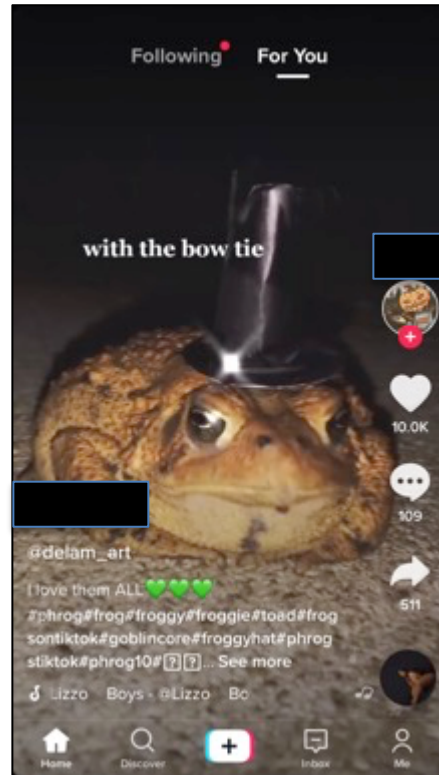

Figure 16: Goblincore, frogs, Lizzo

Figure 16 audio
I like big boys, itty bitty boys
Mississippi boys, inner city boys
I like the pretty boys with the boy tie
Get your nails did, let it blow dry
I like a big beard, I like a clean face
I don't discriminate, come and get a taste[241]

Figure 16 User's Caption
I love them ALL (*3 green heart emojis) #phrog #frog #froggie #toad #frogsontiktok #goblincore #froggyhat #phrogstiktok #phrog10 #fyp #жаба[frog in zhaba] #лягушка [frog in lyagushka]

♫ **Boys - Lizzo**

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[241] "Boys" is the twelfth song Lizzo's 2019 album *Cuz I Love You.*

This video illustrates how users can utilize music and song lyrics to fit their content. Lizzo's "Boys" would not normally be considered goblincore; however, this user changes the narrative of the song from being about men to being about frogs and toads, which makes it a perfect demonstration of what it means to perform goblincore. Furthermore, it illustrates a sort of underlying queerness to this subgenre. It is not only acceptable here, but *appropriate* to profess one's undying love for frogs in dramatic gestures rather than engage in normal heterosexual relationships. This dynamic is summed up in one goblincore meme with the punchline: "They're gay, they'll like this frog picture."

This next example (Figure 17) was created by one of TikTok's most successful gremlincore creators @froggiecrocs (he/him).[242] In @froggiecrocs' video, we see a white, male-presenting person offering a bouquet of dried leaves to the camera (the viewers) over an edited recording of the song "Ophelia" by the folk rock band the Lumineers.[243] He is wearing a patterned sweater, a heavy brown jacket, and his makeup is styled to make him appear swampy and/or decaying. He lip syncs the lyrics to the camera, "Oh, Ophelia / You've been on my mind, girl, since the flood." At the word "flood," he holds up a beaked plague mask, akin to what was worn by plague doctors in seventeenth century Europe. While he does not address it explicitly, the plague mask is likely a reference to the

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[242] This observation is based on the fact that many of his videos pop up as the top "gremlincore" results on TikTok's search engine. Pronouns found in bio.

[243] This edited version is an "original sound" by user @anti.social.audios, meaning this user recorded this particular edit of "Ophelia" for TikTok. From there, @froggiecrocs was able to use it for his video.

COVID-19 pandemic, which gives his lip-syncing performance an added element of relatability. The caption reads:

froggiecrocs
pov – the odd boy from the swamp confesses something (*tooth emoji)
#gremlincore #corvidcore #cottagegore #cryptidcore #dirtcore #fairycore #fyp #adventurecore

♫ **original sound - Antisocial**

The music is fundamental to the content of this tiktok, as the lyrics provide the miniature plot onto which @froggiecrocs sets his gremlincore fantasy. This sort of interaction with music is not necessarily new, but through TikTok it is more accessible than ever. The success of users' performances is based largely on creativity and theatricality, meaning users do not have to be musicians to "perform" songs. With that said, some users do purposefully compose music (or create "sounds") with

Figure 17: Goblincore and lip-syncing swamp boy

the intention that they will be pulled for other videos. For instance, sea shanties are currently experiencing a Renaissance on the app, and some of them are built collaboratively between users. Once posted, others can use those "sounds," which then get credited to the original creator.

The final example I will present in this section is a presentation, or perhaps how-to guide, of the faepunk aesthetic, which the video explains draws

inspiration from goblincore and similar subgenres. This video (Figure 18) by @faepunk is comprised of a collage of images with added text on top defining the subgenre. The background music is "It Will Come Back" by the Irish soul-rock singer Hozier, but it appears on TikTok as an "original sound" by user @hozie_posie. The following is a transcription of the texts as they appear in the video along with brief descriptions of the paired images:
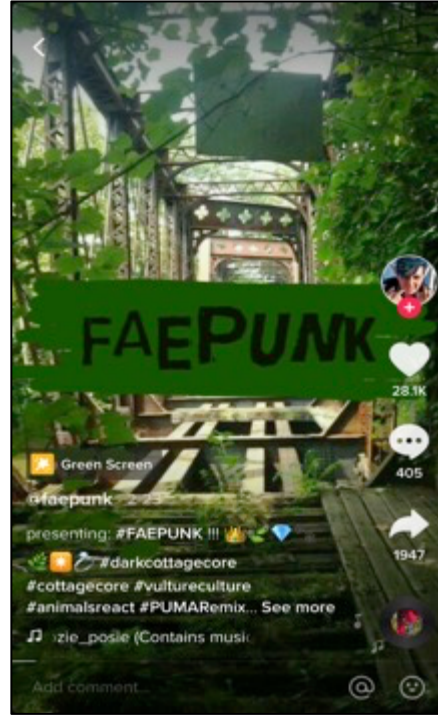

Figure 18: Faepunk aesthetic how-to

[Image 1: a broken, rusty bridge covered by moss and vines] – "Faepunk"

[Image 2: a paint-chipped gazebo covered by moss in a forested area] – "draws inspiration from goblincore, corvidcore, vultureculture and dark cottagecore"

[Image 3: a white hand in a fist wearing two gaudy, jewel rings on each finger] – "SHINIES. excessive jewlery [sic], lots of rings. stolen bits. handmade jewlery from literally anything."

[Image 4: a black and white picture of crows flying as a woman falls, likely a still from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*] – "corvids/other animals with traditionally negative connotations"

[Image 5: the view from within a brick tunnel with ferns and mossy rocks lining the passage] – "bones."

[Image 6: an assemblage of small items, such as a key, a small glass jar, marbles, a necklace, one die] – "fae hoardes. Buttons, shiny things, acorns, pens, etc."

[Image 7: the view from underneath the silhouette of a dog with wolf-like features standing on a stone ledge] – "lots of dark/creepy/unnerving themes"

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[Image 8: the face of a person carved into the bark of a tree] – "media: bridge to terabithia / the wicker king / the raven cycle (specifically blue lily lily blue) / taz amnesty"

[Image 9: a white hand with several gothic rings (black, crystal, skulls) over the seam of a black garment] – "music: hozier /aeseaes / cosmo sheldrake / florence + the machine / mumford and sons / sufjan stevens / the dreadnoughts / radical face"

[Image 10: a screenshot of their Spotify Playlist entitled (*butterfly, leaf, fairy emojis) GOBLINCORE/FAEPUNK (*dog footprint, explosion, exclamation point emojis)] – "I have a playlist for faepunk on spotify, go check it out!"

Faepunk
Presenting: #FAEPUNK !!! (*crown, leaves, diamond, dog footprint, fern, star, diamond ring emojis) #darkcottagecore #cottagecore #vultureculture #animalsreact #PUMARemix #goblincore #showerthoughts #aesthetic

The aesthetic constructed here by @faepunk appeals to the sensibilities of traditional punk and goth while simultaneously privileging earthy tones, textiles, and a sense of magic. This video also demonstrates how people who are identifying with goblincore/faepunk are organizing music in order to further situate their real-world experiences within the subgenre. A quick search of "goblincore" on Spotify will show a seemingly endless list of playlists with "goblincore" in the title that are created by Spotify users.[244] Posts like this demonstrate the importance of music and sound to fulfilling an aesthetic subgenre. They also illustrate another way that people are experiencing music today, which is by understanding it as something akin to an outfit. Music here is part of "the look." I will discuss these implications in the last section of my analysis.

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[244] Spotify does not disclose the number of matching search results, and I could not find the bottom of the list.

Fairycore and Identity: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

In his research on the circulation of Slender Man lore, Andrew Peck notes how the visibility of people's lives enabled by today's social media technologies "creates an awareness that individual actions exist as part of a larger body of practice."[245] Not only are users creating their own personal archives of their experiences, outfits, and performances, but by using hashtags they are also contributing their work to the larger community of individuals who navigate these online spaces. Therefore, there is tremendous variety in the content found under #fairycore and #goblincore on these social media platforms. From professional outfit/costume designers promoting their craft, to adolescents trying out different styles in their endeavors to express themselves, people from around the world and with different motivations contribute to these online archives.

Despite the various backgrounds of users and the different ways in which they perform these alternative genres, they share an attraction to the fantasy worlds so often depicted in books, movies, and art stretching back centuries in Western Europe. However, they come to fantasy for different reasons. Because fairies and other fantastical creatures have been depicted in stories and art for so long, and in such different ways depending on the narrative, they have accumulated layers upon layers of meaning. Thus, they are perfect vessels onto which fairycore participants can project their complex identities. Whether they are expressing their female sexuality, their neo-pagan practices, or their desire to

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[245] Peck, "Capturing the Slender Man: Online and Offline Vernacular Practice in the Digital Age," 33.

escape urbanity and become a swamp creature, there is a fairy for them. In this section, we will see that the fairycore experience is differentiated, and even within constructed fantasy worlds, real life concerns, limitations, and motivations have a way of creeping in.

Performing these aesthetics in the real world can be intimidating for some, whereas online spaces provide an element of safety. More than that, online technologies allow for an ever-growing amount of special effects, a wider audience of interested people, and you do not need a license to have a platform. These qualities make for endless imaginative possibilities that would be much more difficult and socially risky to perform "in the real world." TikTok user @Enchanted_Noir, or Lauren, explained it to me like this:

> I have noticed online I am perceived more positively than offline. I think because I've built a community for myself of like-minded individuals, I do tend to feel a little self-conscious going out in public in full cottagecore attire, but that might be a testament to my own confidence rather than people's actual reaction.[246]

Lauren is a popular cottagecore and fairycore performer on TikTok (Figure 19). She is a twenty-nine-year-old Black woman from Pennsylvania, uses she/her pronouns, and identifies as LGBTQ+.[247] It might be ironic that the Internet feels like a safer space than one's own community, but the comfort comes from having knowledge (and sometimes control) of who is likely to see your content. The audience is wider *and* more curated. In Lauren's words,

> I love that within the virtual cottagecore community one can reach so many more people than would otherwise be possible, especially with the current situation of lockdowns and social distancing due to Covid. Without the

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[246] Email interview with Lauren (@Enchanted_Noir), December 10-11, 2020.

[247] Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, queer, plus.

virtual ways that I've met other cottagecore creators, I wouldn't know nearly half as much as I do now.[248]

Besides #cottagecore and #fairycore, Lauren's content intersects with hashtags like #princesscore, #softgirl, and #farmcore. She describes her content as "a romanticized view of cottagecore fashion and lifestyle. . .vent[uring] off sometimes with some joke content." Cottagecore is a highly feminine subgenre that presents a romantic view of agricultural living and draws inspiration from nineteenth and early twentieth-century women's fashions. Conforming to the aesthetic, Lauren features objects and activities that are reminiscent of past centuries such as tea sets, old books, and gardening. Cottagecore and

Figure 19:Lauren (@Enchanted_Noir

fairycore look very similar within her content, but her fairycore performances usually include fairy wings.

Many of Lauren's tiktoks are also directed at the WLW (Women Loving Women) community, which is a common pairing with cottagecore.[249] The hashtag assemblages found in the captions of posts like Lauren's draw together content that celebrates femininity, elegance, and a touch of magic. The fairies

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[248] In the US, COVID-19 lockdowns started to be implemented about nine months before my interview with Lauren; Lauren (@Enchanted_Noir), December 10-11, 2020.

[249] WLW is an acronym that is popular in Black communities for lesbians. In her tiktoks, Lauren often pokes fun at the fact that she is married to a man but is very attracted to women doing cottagecore on TikTok.

represented here are enchanting, and at times, a bit seductive. What is interesting here is how these femme performers combine the stylings of the Romantic and Victorian era with commentaries on female sexuality, race representation (usually by Black performers like Lauren), LGBTQ+ identity, and elements of self-reliance or domesticity.[250] This is clearly demonstrated in one short tiktok in which the layer of text emphasized in Lauren's video is "Let Black Girls Be Soft." LGBTQ+ people, People of Color, and people who are otherwise non-conforming to the expectations of the twenty-first century are reclaiming these fashions, lifestyles, and this period of time for themselves. Obviously users cannot time travel, but through these social media technologies, they can form personal archives that represent their identities in reimagined worlds. Their images and videos give the impression that they are far removed from the modern world, even though they are filmed with modern technology and are often carefully constructed. It is a new kind of fantasy world altogether: one that encompasses pre-industrial lifestyles, nature, and magic, while celebrating femininity, sexual freedom, and Blackness within the genre.

Not everyone who performs under these hashtags shares this same fantasy of race, gender, and sexual orientation representation. Although cottagecore often functions as a critique of industrial capitalism and heteronormativity, it is also enjoyed by those on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Fandom's *Aesthetic Wiki* (similar to Wikipedia but specifically for nerd cultures) explains,

> Cottagecore has been also criticized for its romanticism of Eurocentric farming life, and in the context of North American and Australian settings, an inadvertent celebration of the aesthetics of colonialism, as well as the

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[250] Femme describes female-presenting people and women (including trans women).

ways it often simplifies and underestimates the labour of farmers. It is due to these connotations that the use of Cottagecore aesthetics has been adopted by the TradWives community and members of the far-right as forms of propaganda.[251]

While there are a few specific differences between fairycore and cottagecore, their common pairing in posts means that they often reach similar audiences. Within both aesthetics, it is difficult for People of Color or gender-nonconforming people to gain the same following as performers who are thin white women. I learned more about how Black performers navigate this in my interview with Taj over Instagram messaging. He goes by @polaris.the.light on both TikTok and Instagram (Figures 20-21).
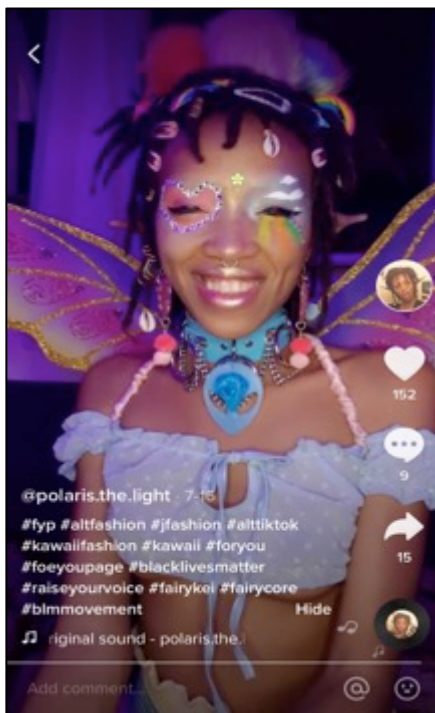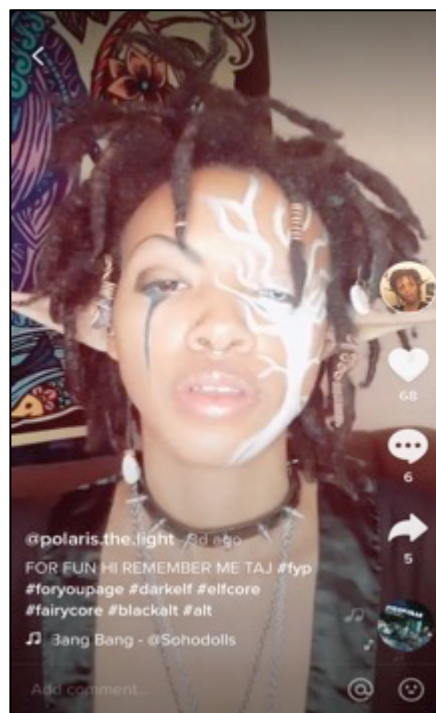

Figure 20: Fae King Taj 1

Figure 21: Fae King Taj 2

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[251] I am using this as a primary source because it is a popular and highly-consulted source within the aesthetic community. It demonstrates how the culture is viewing different aesthetics at any given point in time. "Cottagecore," *Aesthetic Wiki*, Fandom, Accessed December 17, 2020, https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Cottagecore.

Taj identifies as Black, pansexual, and he is from the Midwest in the

United States. His preferred pronouns are he/they/fae. About his pronouns he

explained,

> I don't have "fae" displayed on [Instagram] because it doesn't fit in my bio
> aha as well as people have a hard enough time getting he/they right on
> Instagram. My gender identity is genderfluid leaning on the more
> masculine side. I have done a lot of feminine looks in the past and I can do
> them whenever I want, I prefer to be seen in a masculine way though! I
> prefer he over my other pronouns but they're still important too.[252]

There is enough meaning and symbolism behind the Fae for Taj that he

has incorporated them into his pronouns, which may be the 2020-2021

equivalent of adopting a new name or title. He consistently uses hashtags that

link his content to both Black and LGBTQ+ communities with tags such as

#blackalt, #genderqueer, #genderfluid, #nonbinary, and #paganpoc.[253] Taj's

fairycore content is almost entirely different from Lauren's, even though they are

visible in the same online spaces through the use of the fairycore hashtag.[254]

Instead of drawing his inspiration from the fashions of past centuries, Taj

combines many other aesthetics in creating his own fluid styles. He describes his

Instagram content as a "mix of vampire, warlock, and faerie,"[255] and he also

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[252] There is a character cap on Instagram bios, so users have to carefully consider which parts of
their identity they would like to represent at any point in time. Instagram messaging interview
with Taj (@polaris.the.light), December 12, 2020.

[253] Some of these hashtags are more popular than others. There are thousands of posts on
Instagram linked to #blackalt (more considering variations like #blackalternativegirl), millions of
posts linked to #genderqueer, and less than fifty posts linked to #paganpoc. Using an original or
unpopular hashtag creates the digital space for others to begin to apply it to their own posts.

[254] Besides these, he also uses #alttiktok, #decorakei, #witchtok, #darkelf, and #elfcore.

[255] Taj (@polaris.the.light), December 12, 2020

frequently cosplays as anime characters. On the difference between his cosplay

and personal style, he clarified for me,

> My personal style is pretty much vampiric, I like fangs. I also like pointed ears as well, most assume it's because I like elves but it's really a fae thing. I like to say I want to be perceived as a magician or warlock with my clothes aha, all the pictures you see of me not wearing a cosplay on my page are things I wear everyday. Offline I represent myself as otherworldly, but it's not to prove anything really its just what I'm interested in. I get really passionate, like this is what I want to express! Then I do.[256]

Rather than representing the feminized version of fairies (popularized in

Victorian England), Taj's style expresses different layers of meaning associated

with fairies: gender-fluidity/androgynousness, moral ambiguity, and pagan

religions.[257] These older associations are more representative of the Irish Sidhe or

the trickster fairies of Early Modern England, even though his style appears more

kitsch than ancient.[258] Taj has practiced witchcraft since 2016, so the pagan or

"witchy" aspects of his style are more than just decorative. They reflect an aspect

of his spiritual identity.

I asked Taj how he experiences the intersection of his Black and gender-

fluid identity within the fairycore community. He took a lot of time to give me a

thorough answer, and it was clear that this topic is on his mind often and he is

passionate speaking about it. I will include his full answer here with only minor

formatting edits.

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[256] Taj (@polaris.the.light), December 12, 2020

[257] The theatre and visual arts of Victorian England began to represent fairies as explicitly female, whereas they were mostly depicted as androgynous before this time. Marian Wilson Kimber, "Victorian Fairies and Felix Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream in England," *Nineteenth-century Music Review* 4, no. 1 (2007): 53-79.

[258] I will discuss Early Modern English fairies more in my Chapter IV.

Remember how I was saying I was underappreciated on TikTok? It's because they don't promote me like they do other creators. You have to be a certain standard to have your content pushed, on TikTok especially, but everywhere really. White creators of any subculture are more likely to get their content pushed than I am. In fact my most popular tiktok is one where I'm dressing fairycore [and] talking about discrimination I've faced in the alt community. I feel like the only time black creators are given a platform is if they want to be vulnerable about their oppression. Like there were so many commenters on my video saying, 'You look amazing why haven't I ever heard of you?' Etc.

Which is like, it's because the algorithm only favors me when I fit into the box it would like. I definitely have privilege from being a skinny lighter skinned black person, but I still have to work twice as hard as someone who's white for instance. This isn't anything new, and it's not necessarily all the communities' fault either, it's the racist algorithms as well. But this is the reason black people always have to make a sub community in ANY subculture they enter.

Like the reason I have such a good, supportive, growing following on twitter is because of my fellow black cosplayers and creators. We support each other's content and make it blow up. Honestly before I found the black cosplay community on twitter I was kind of down about the content I was putting out because I knew it was good, but it wasn't getting viewed or shared at all.

I was actually just talking about this the other day, because as an artist myself it's the same thing (I'm an illustrator and a painter). And I noticed my other black artist mutuals making spaces for ourselves so we can have a community, enjoy our hobbies, and spread each other's posts. Like I said before it's way more progressive than it used to be but it's still pretty bad aha.

As far as sexual orientation, being trans masc and presenting masculine definitely changed the way people interact with my content. When I was doing mostly femme presenting, I was going by all pronouns, but with that people still compartmentalized me with being a girl. Then after being misgendered constantly I decided she/her was like completely out, that changed things a lot.

When I came out on Instagram the vibes were so weird. I expected more support, but it was like everyone was ignoring it or something. I honestly got really demoralized. By coming out I mean asserting my pronouns and dressing masc[uline] on main. Anyway it wasn't until I found a more supportive queer community on twitter that I had more confidence to keep asserting my real self on here.

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Being trans masc is weird because people who are transphobic are like, 'No you're just a girl.' And there are people in the queer community even that only address things [as if] cis people are the only people who exist. As in like 'Oh why are men like this? Men are terrible!' When they really are speaking on cis men. It like puts trans men and mascs out sometimes [because] it's like, no I'm not a girl, but I'm also not a cis man... I don't know, I feel like we are really ignored unless we are insanely attractive.

I think in general we still have more work to do with accepting nonconventional people and putting them in our minds when we think of the world.[259]

What Taj helped me understand is that even within a community that is predicated on being non-conforming, biases exist that privilege the performances of white cis-gendered people who can easily replicate the fantasy aesthetics of the books, art, and movies of the last century. Those outside of this standard of beauty are active within these communities, but must work hard to promote themselves and the work of other marginalized artists. Taj consistently shares the work of other Black artists, especially fellow cosplayers, on Instagram. This in turn has led me to discover several incredible artists I may not have stumbled across otherwise.

While social media algorithms are not designed to be racist, they have historically lacked the ability to address socio-cultural information, which disproportionally affects marginalized people.[260] Today we might say that they are not anti-racist enough. For instance, if a user does not interact with content from particular social/interest groups, they will not be "pushed" their content.

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[259] Taj (@polaris.the.light), December 12, 2020.

[260] Draude et al, "Situated Algorithms: A Sociotechnical Systemic Approach to Bias," *Online Information Review* 44, no. 2 (2019): 325.

This filtering causes each person's social media feed to be specifically tailored to their *perceived* interests. There is a growing awareness among data scientists and consumers on algorithmic biases, and many social media users actively take steps to mitigate them. [261] One way to counteract bias as a user is to purposefully engage with different kinds of content and creators; it is all readily available with some intentionality. The content I see today includes more Black voices than just a year ago after much purposeful engagement outside of my inner circle. Taj also speaks to the fact that many white users, especially in the months following the murder of George Floyd, are guilty of only considering Black art when it speaks to Black trauma. This is disingenuous and performative, and it perpetuates the notion that being Black equates to constant suffering. What white users like myself should do, rather, is uplift Black artistry, stories, and achievements regularly without imposing our own narratives onto them.

Another artist who is working to represent Blackness in fantasy genres is author and artist Aiysha Sinclair with her small business Brown Sugar Fairies. Sinclair identifies as Afro-Caribbean American, female (she/her), and a first generation American. Brown Sugar Fairies encompasses Sinclair's children's books illustrated by Joyceline Furniss, as well as fairy cards, coloring books, and other pieces of artwork. Besides having an online and social media presence, Sinclair tables the work of her and Furniss at festivals and conventions such as FaerieCon and ComicCon. Her books were inspired by the fashions of Omo Valley

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[261] See Draude et al, "Situated Algorithms," 325-342. The authors discuss translational work across disciplines to mitigate biases.

in Ethiopia, which incorporate flowers and bright face-paint. Sinclair says that

when she saw images from Omo Valley, they looked like an "African version of

[fairy folk]" to her.[262] In our over-the-phone interview, I asked her about whether

there were any particularly rewarding moments for her as a creator. She said,

> When I was able to go out and do conventions and things like that, or you know, events, and actually seeing people, meeting people who wanted to buy them—you know who just *saw the images and just wanted to buy them*—those are the most rewarding moments for me, is that reaction. I've seen people cry over it, you know? It's like because they see so much of *themselves* in that or they see their *best friend* in that, or they see, you know, someone that they know. And they buy it for themselves, and they buy it for children that are babies, that just want to start their book collection. So I think that's the most rewarding for me, is just that it's serving its purpose, and it's filling that need for *everyone,* not just Black people, but for *everyone* to be able to see something of fantasy that's reflective of our actual world.[263]

In her last thought, Sinclair delineates what makes this subgenre so

powerful: it represents both our reality and our aspirations for how life could be.

Participants express their complex identities and lived experiences within this

fantasy mode, and they have the agency to create the kind of world they wish to

see around them. Rather than representing fantasy worlds that are unrelatable

and unachievable, participants draw out their own innate beauty and

complexities. The subgenre is not immune to our biases, though, especially since

it largely exists within the confines of modern technologies, but it does offer

participants a platform on social media to emphasize and explore important

aspects of their identity. For example, users may emphasize their gender identity,

affirm their sexual orientation, and/or represent their race and ethnicity within a

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[262] Phone Interview with Aiysha Sinclair, September 17, 2020.

[263] Aiysha Sinclair, September 17, 2020.

historically white European space. These subtle modes of resistance are what sociologists have called "serious play." Professor of child and youth studies Hans Skott-Myhre writes that fashion subcultures are not just frivolous entertainment, but "create an affirmation of possibility against constraint, fatalism, and foreclosure."[264] Here fairycore participants are manifesting the space for themselves in which they can express their real-world concerns, hopes, and desires. In Taj's words, "It's freeing."[265] In the next part of my analysis, I will demonstrate how users engage in serious play in not just their alternative fashions, but also in how they represent their relationship with the natural world.

Heterotopias and the Natural World

While fairycore and goblincore (hereafter abbreviated with fc and gc) are quite different aesthetics, one important similarity between the two is an emphasis on nature. Within these archives there is a sense that users are escaping the modern world, even though pictures and videos are usually taken on smartphones and are only available on social media because of Internet connection. In this post by Hernandez (Figure 22), we can see how she navigates her use of a microphone by draping it vines in an attempt to stay true to the aesthetic while still taking advantage of modern technology, as if nature has reclaimed the performance space.

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[264] Skott-Myhre, "Serious Play," 797.

[265] Taj (@polaris.the.light), December 12, 2020.

The importance of nature in these subcultures intersects with the subtle or at times very explicit elements of paganism. Not all participants have a literal belief in fairies, but some do, and even more practice witchcraft to some extent. In his writing on neo-Paganism, historian Ronald Hutton writes that by the nineteenth century, both the words "heathen" and "pagan" had "widely accepted associations with the countryside and the natural world."[266] Poets such as Shelley, Keats, and Schiller strengthened these associations in their poetry, which frequently romanticized the countryside in the midst of English industrialization and

Figure 22: Priscilla Hernandez

urbanization. These same poems regularly included characters such as fairies, Pan, and the Greek gods and goddesses. Shelley never entirely abandoned his Christian beliefs, but he did casually engage in "applied paganism" reminiscent of the behaviors of many fc and gc participants.[267] In a letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg he wrote,

> I am glad that you do not neglect the rites of the true religion. Your letter awoke my sleeping devotions, and the same evening I ascended alone the
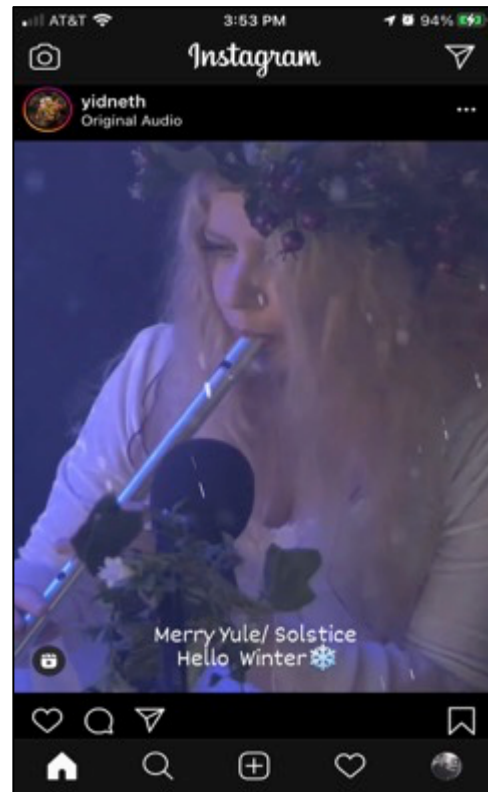
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[266] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon : A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

[267] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 25.

high mountain behind my house, and suspended a garland, and raised a small turf altar to the mountain-walking Pan.[268]

Shelley left his modern comforts to venture into a wild space, in this case a nearby mountain, in order to perform his ritual. Today, most people have little to no access to spaces that are truly wild or natural, but fc and gc participants do often take advantage of gardens and other outdoor areas when creating their content. In many of these pictures and videos, nature is not the focus, but it is the appropriate aesthetic backdrop for users' performances. The user in Figure 23 is standing in a wooded location and dressed as a faun as they lip sync a scene from the movie *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992). Whether or not this user is

aware of the history of the pagan god Pan, perhaps the most infamous faun, their performance demonstrates that still today this archetypal character is relevant in popular culture.

Pan was a complex figure in Romantic era art and poetry. In the broadest sense, he was a guardian figure of the natural world, so his image was meant to generate nostalgia from city-dwellers whose lives were changing dramatically due to industrialization. However, Keats in *Endymion* also uses Pan as
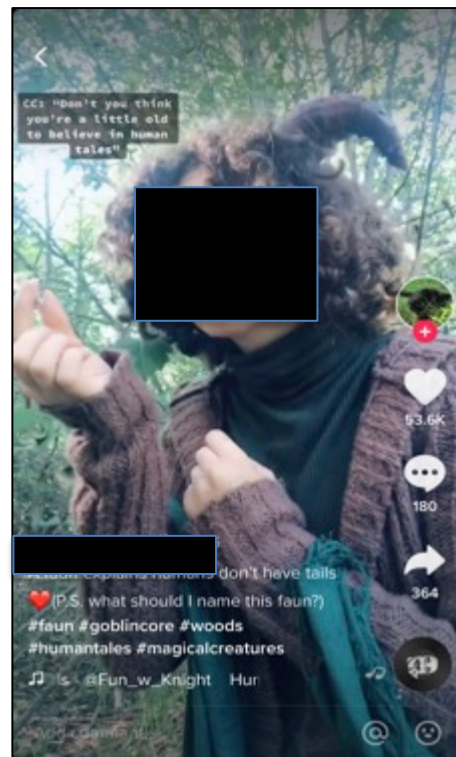

Figure 23: Pan performance

[268] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 25.

a symbol of creativity and imagination, specifically for poets "who felt themselves to be in revolt against social norms."[269] Taking this idea a step further in the twentieth century, this character often covertly served as a "liberator" of marginalized sexual orientations and the repression of female sexuality.[270] Playwright and novelist Somerset Maugham recalled that during the early twentieth century, "God went out (oddly enough with cricket and beer) and Pan came in." Maugham notes that the "literary ladies in Surrey, nymphs of an industrial age, mysteriously surrendered their virginity to his rough embrace."[271]

By featuring Pan, fairies, and other mythical creatures within these performance spaces, users are enchanting their surroundings, and a distinction emerges between these ancient or Otherworldly spaces and our modern industrial world. Foucault's concept of heterotopia is one way to describe the alternative fantasy spaces found in fc and gc content. Peter Johnson argues that heterotopias are "fundamentally disturbing," as they "alter to different degrees what might be described as everyday existence."[272] In looking through users' online archives, we are able to peer into their constructed fantasy heterotopias in which normal outdoor areas become enchanted through users' use of costumes, filters, sound/music, and how they frame these areas in their captions. These heterotopic spaces are frozen in time through the use of photography and video, which makes them both spatially and temporally separate from the everyday life.

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[269] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 46.

[270] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 48.

[271] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 48.
[272] Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'different Spaces," 84.

In Figure 24, this is clearly demonstrated by @froggiecrocs' caption "pov – you enter another world." This tiktok quickly moves through short clips of different locations featuring small waterfalls, creeks, and overgrown stone steps. The music he chose as accompaniment is an arpeggiating harp, an instrument that is strongly associated with fantasy culture. I will discuss the use of music further in the next section.
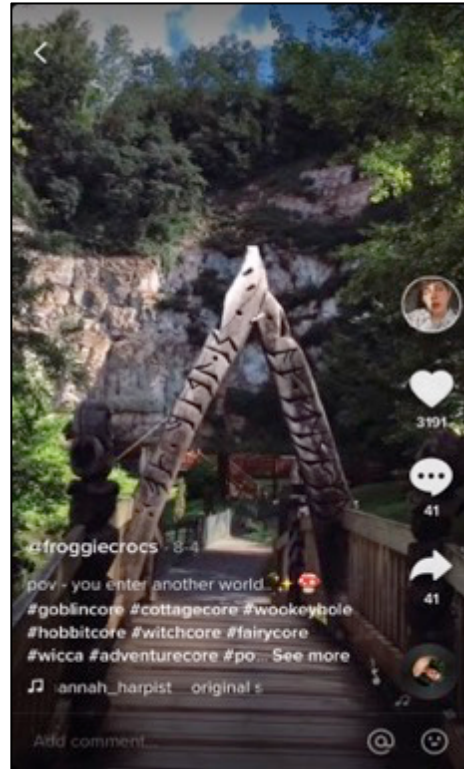

Figure 24: "You enter another world"

According to Johnson's interpretation, heterotopias are also spaces in which power-dynamics are subtly challenged. This can be seen in myriad ways within fc and gc content as users escape their modern urban lives, dress up as mythical creatures, and at times even practice different forms of witchcraft.[273] The spaces constructed by users become an "escape route from power," in which users gain control of their space and model subtle forms of resistance within it. In other words, these heterotopic spaces become the stage for users' serious play.

Figure 25 is a tiktok video tagged under #goblincore, but it contains no explicitly magical elements or references. The subject of this goblincore video is the location and the activities of the user. The creator is white and uses he/him

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[273] Some of the most popular forms of witchcraft I've seen from fairycore users include working with crystals, reading tarot cards, and performing spells.

pronouns, but I am leaving him anonymous since he is a minor. Here is a

transcription of the video as well as his caption and hashtags.

Figure 25 user's audio:
Am *I* in the middle of the woods?
[Scans surroundings]
In a fort that *I* built? [Shows the
inside roof of his fort made of
branches]
Um, reading *poetry*, um, by *myself*??
[Shows book of poetry]
When it's, uh, *raining*?!
 Uuuum, *I mean I guess...* [flips
camera to show his face; as he gives
an understated "I guess," his huge
smile shows that he is clearly excited]

Figure 25 caption:
I live in the woods!! #fyp #foryoupage
#woods #hiking #poetry #writing
#cottagecore #goblincore

♫ **original sound – [user's
handle]**

This video is humorous. The user is

manipulating his voice to make it clear that

Figure 25: Serious play in the woods

he's very excited to be in this location, but he is trying to be "low-key" about it. [274]

His performance (and the amount of attention it has received: 128.5K likes as of

writing these words) emphasizes how valued this experience is today, especially

among young people. It is not "magical" in the same sense that fairies are, but it

is rare enough that users deem it significant.

The serious play here is that this user is choosing against modern comforts

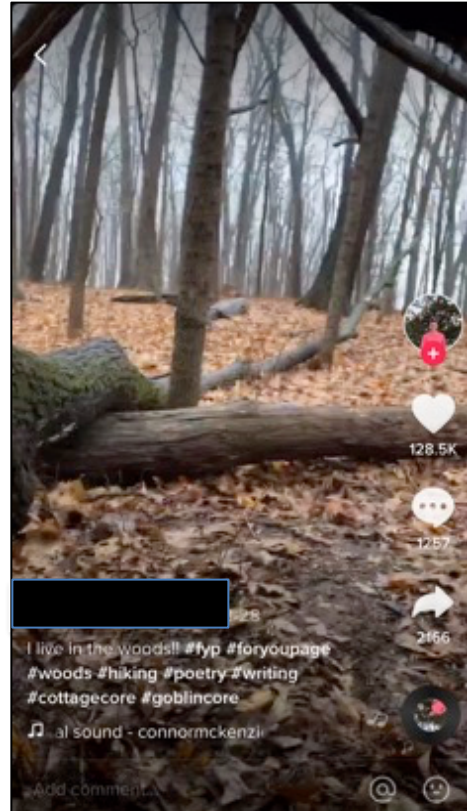and technology (ironically, except for the use of his cell phone to document the

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[274] Being "low-key" is slang today for being "chill" or nonchalant about something.

experience), which is a common theme in fc and gc content. He separates himself

from his everyday lifestyle by venturing into this wooded area, and here he

constructs his own temporary shelter made of branches before reading from a

book of poetry. In his work on youth and politics in 2015, Andy Bennett writes

about the appropriation of rural spaces by young people as partly a consequence

of their "disillusionment and/or exclusion" from urban lifestyles due to

unemployment or cost of living.[275] In considering fc and gc content, I would add

here that these spaces provide an escape from gender/sexuality expectations and

the pressures to succeed in schoolwork or jobs. They provide an opportunity to

feel connected to nature at a time when the state of the environment is a real

concern to young people.[276] Professor of geography Kevin Hetherington applies

the concept of "earth mysteries" to how youth engage with these spaces, writing:

> Earth mysteries practitioners adopt a more holistic approach that refers back to ancient folk ways of understanding and interpreting the landscape: dowsing, ley line hunting, recovering folklore and customs associated with particular sites. The earth mysteries tradition challenges the modes of understanding offered by modern science and seeks to find in the landscape forgotten practices of knowing and understanding.[277]

We can see this longing for forgotten knowledge or lifestyles within fc and

gc archives. Although participants cannot easily escape modern lifestyles, they

can push back against them in their play. From mushroom foraging and

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[275] Andy Bennett, "Youth and Play: Identity, Politics, and Lifestyle," In *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2015) 781.

[276] Students are aware that climate change poses a threat to their futures. "Fridays for Future" is a student-led movement started by activist Greta Thunberg in 2018 in which students walk out of school to bring attention to the need for climate related reforms. It is now a global movement.

[277] Andy Bennett, "Youth and Play: Identity, Politics, and Lifestyle," 782.

gardening to using crystals and casting spells, it is clear that many users find value in pre-modern ways of living and interacting with the world. It should be noted, however, that the images and videos published online do not necessarily represent the regular experiences of participants. This is more performative for some users than others. Even as a carefully constructed and curated product, however, this content demonstrates an aspiration to realize these lifestyles. People are especially interested in sustainability and self-sufficiency right now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked Lauren (@enchanted_noir) if she thought the pandemic affected cottagecore and fairycore in any way. She wrote,

> I think a lot of people today are interested in cottagecore because it is essentially returning to a more simplistic state. In essence, it praises sustainability, and being self-sufficient is something that I feel is greatly wanted with the uncertainty that the pandemic has brought.[278]

In sum, the natural spaces seen in fc and gc content are heterotopic; they are distinct from users' everyday lives, and they model a closer relationship with nature based on ancient or magical modes of understanding. Users construct personal archives of their heterotopias, and they contribute to larger archives through the use of hashtags. We can see how users challenge modernity within these fantasy subcultures by placing more value on sustainability, self-sufficiency, and mystery over efficiency, monetary gain, and progress. Users use their platforms to express their ideological values and complex identities, thus engaging in serious play.

Music's Role in Constructing Heterotopias

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[278] Lauren (@Enchanted_Noir), December 10-11, 2020.

In this section I will discuss the use of music in strengthening users' heterotopias, playlists curated for different aesthetics, and the different ways in which professional musicians navigate these subcultures. Not only is music used in videos to further associations with fantasy genres, but it may also be used to express other aspects of users' identities—and since those identities are so varied, the music that accompanies them is likewise diverse.

Some of the music in this section speaks to fairies' continued associations with Irish folk traditions. Songs that perform especially well do so by signaling important aspects of Irish folk music, such as the vocal style and downbeat emphasis, while still appealing to popular music sensibilities. Another prominent music found in fc and gc is "fantasy," a genre that would likely not exist if it were not for fantasy nerd culture.[279] Fantasy music privileges instruments like flutes, harps, violins, and kettle drums. More often than not, it uses minor keys and heavy reverb to aurally portray a vast and mysterious landscape. These signifiers of ancient and medieval Europe are combined with more modern chord progressions and melodic lines, setting the stage for "our hero's adventure."[280] Fantasy music also leans into strange timbres, synthesized sounds, and the distant echoes of a soprano voice (perhaps a fair maiden or seductive siren). Some of these same qualities might also be called psychedelic in a rock and roll context. Fairycore draws on fantasy music and is more likely to incorporate

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[279] Fantasy nerd culture includes, for example, such interests as playing Dungeons and Dragons, an affinity for Tolkien, *Game of Thrones,* and more recently *the Witcher* (a book and game series). Common themes are wizards, dragons, potions, sword fights, unicorns, and epic adventures.

[280] This phrase is used frequently in Dungeons and Dragons, representing a fantasy trope.

flutes/ocarinas, violins, and harp, which produce a more subdued and ethereal quality than music deemed goblincore. Other music deemed fc and gc is simply contemporary music that is repurposed for the aesthetic through its lyrics and accompanying visual elements. There is overlap within music deemed fairycore or goblincore depending on personal interpretations of the aesthetic.

I will begin by discussing how users utilize music in the construction of their own heterotopias and in making their content "fit" their ideal aesthetic. I asked one popular gremlincore performer Jaq (they/them, @yucky.kid) how they choose their sounds/music on TikTok, and they explained,

> Really there isn't any specific process I go by when choosing sounds. I generally just find songs that I like personally or will save audio from other people's videos that I feel like I could use for my own content. I did discover Cosmo Sheldrake from TikTok though, and I think that his music gives gremlincore/fae vibes.[281]

Cosmo Sheldrake's music is extremely popular in goblincore (gremlincore, etc.) videos on TikTok, and it is featured on every goblincore playlist that I have thus seen. It has been deemed by users as an aesthetic fit, even though Sheldrake himself does not explicitly link his music to these subcultures. By searching his name on TikTok under "Sounds," I can see the top results for his music, with the first being an excerpt from his "Tardigrade Song" from the album *Pelicans We*. Clicking this "sound" links users to trending videos in which the song is being used. The lyrics heard in this excerpt of the song are as follows:

> Lai, lai-lai-lai lai lai, lai-lai lai-lai lai lai
> I live in the shrubbery, for that's all I crave
> I don't want these excitements to see me to my grave[282]

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[281] Email interview with Jaq (@yucky.kid), December 23, 2020.

[282] Cosmo Sheldrake, "Tardigrade Song," *Pelicans We,* April 6, 2015.

In just this short excerpt are two key themes in goblincore content: living

amongst nature ("I live in the shrubbery") and death or decay ("see me to my

grave"). Besides the lyrics, other elements
of the song that contribute to its
"goblincore/fae" vibes might be the vocal
style, the instrumentation, and the strong
emphasis on each downbeat. The melody is
akin to a folksong, easily singable (E
natural minor) and repetitive. It is
reminiscent of the vocal style of Irish folk
musicians or medieval bards, or at least
what modern listeners might associate
with the music of bards.[283]

Figure 26: Cosmo Sheldrake, "Tardigrade Song," example 1

The harmonies, especially the use of
a drone at times, might also be compared to
Bulgarian choral singing, which problematizes the sonic construction of some

fantasy worlds. Conflating geographical distance (to Western Europe and North

America, that is) with ancientness exoticizes and appropriates timbres that

listeners might unknowingly identify as zany or Otherworldly.

The song is in ¾ time and completely unsyncopated, and the beat is

emphasized by a clap and wooden keyboard instruments that have a toy-like

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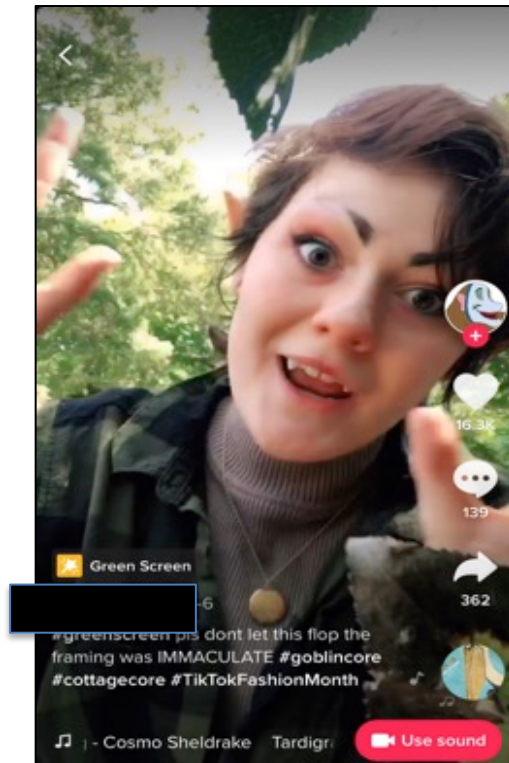[283] What listeners today might think of as "bard music" is likely based on their portrayal in movies and video games, rather than through historical knowledge.

quality to them. This toy-like quality perhaps serves to index the miniature—or goblin-sized instruments. Every four measures on Beat 1 a low brass instrument sounds the tonic with an explosive tone. A ratchet-like instrument is also on a 4-measure loop, sounding on Beat 2 of the measure preceding each low-brass entrance. This gives a cumbersome and unrefined quality to the pulse. Here are a few examples of tiktoks that use this song with brief descriptions of each video, their captions, and hashtags used.
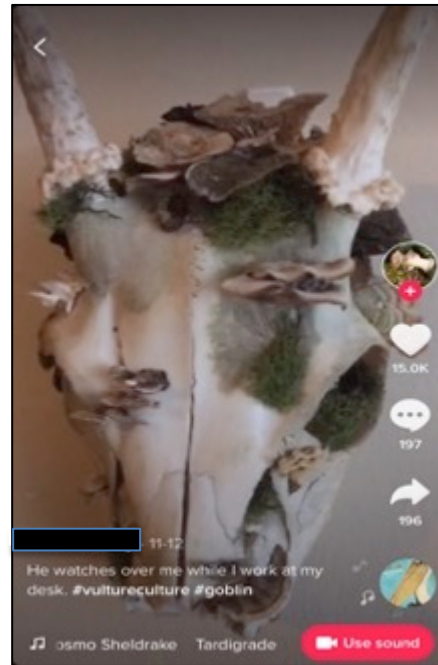

Figure 27: Cosmo Sheldrake, "Tardigrade Song," example 2

Figure 26 description:
The video starts by quickly scanning images that fit the goblincore aesthetic, featuring bones, necklaces, old shoes, and dried plants. The subject (white, they/them) then lip-syncs the lyrics to the song. They are wearing elf ears and fangs. They appear to be in a wooded area, but the video is labeled with a "Green Screen" effect.

Figure 26 user
#greenscreen pls dont let this flop the framing was IMMACULATE #goblincore #cottagecore #TikTokFasionMonth

♫ **Tardigrade Song – Cosmo Sheldrake**

Figure 27 description:

Figure 28: Cosmo Sheldrake, "Tardigrade Song," example 3

A user (white, she/her) shows off her project in which she decorated a deer skull with dried fungi and moss.

Figure 27 user
He watches over me while I work at my desk. #vultureculture #goblin

♫ **Tardigrade Song – Cosmo Sheldrake**

Figure 28 description:
The subject (white, he/they) walks in a wooded area, showing off his outfit and hair while also filming the space around him. He does a close-up of moss on a log (also displaying the rings on his fingers) and he poses with a tree.

Figure 28 user
hard work bein the neighborhood cryptid #nonbinary #enby #cryptidcore #cottagecore #cottagegore #darkacademia #corvidcore #moss #witchtok #lgbt #outfit

♫ **Tardigrade Song – Cosmo Sheldrake**

In Figure 26 and Figure 28, I argue that the function of this song is to give these users' heterotopias a distinct soundscape, therefore completing their miniature world-building and further distinguishing these worlds from their everyday realities. "Tardigrade Song" appeals to the tastes of modern listeners while still containing enough bizarre and cinematic qualities to set the stage for users' fantasy performances. The song functions differently in Figure 27, where it plays in the background while the user speaks. Here I suggest that this particular song was chosen as a way to associate the art project with the goblincore community. From her use of this song as well as her chosen hashtags, we get a sense of the audience she is performing to and the desired "vibes" of her content.

Users not only use themed music for their online performances, but they also mobilize these fantasy soundscapes through the use of curated playlists available on their smartphones (Figure 29). These playlists aid users in

identifying with their desired aesthetic within their everyday lives. Participants can search for these playlists on Spotify or YouTube (which are popular music streaming applications), or they might find music that fits an aesthetic in how-to guides as previously seen in Figure 18. Figure 29 is an example from Instagram in which someone made a "Guide to Cozy Goblincore" complete with a list of curated songs. This post contains images/slides explaining the following:
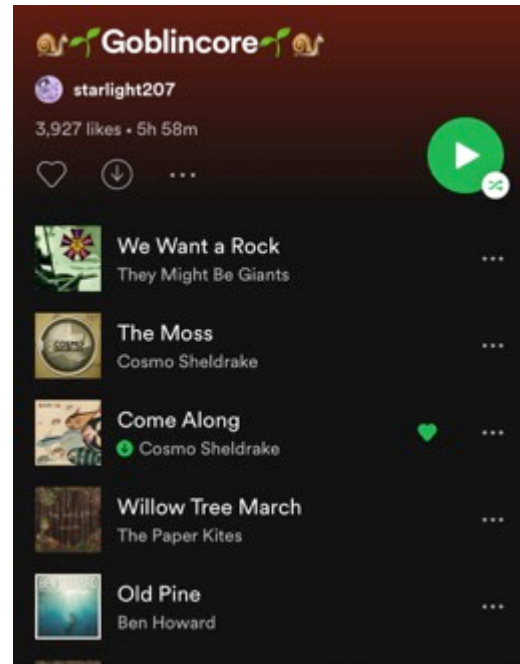

Figure 29: Goblincore playlist

the Essentials, Activities, A Lookbook, A Playlist, and Some Room Inspo. Together these categories encompass the visual aspects of the aesthetic, the activities one might partake in, and the aural experience. However, even if users are moving within their daily lives and are not dressed in goblincore clothes or adventuring in nature, listening to these playlists helps participants to feel goblincore by providing its sounds within their space. Participants thus gain a small amount of control over their environment by having the ability to choose their soundscape. In the case of fantasy-inspired soundscapes, users are able to enchant the world around them. On TikTok especially, users might use songs outside of their aesthetic in order to perform to a certain audience, index popular culture trends, or perform multiple aspects of their identity. For example, Figure 16 (frogs and toads to Lizzo's "Boys") demonstrates how referencing popular

music while shifting the narrative is appealing to audiences that are familiar with this music.

There are many musicians that work within these subcultures and purposefully align themselves with these aesthetics through the use of hashtags. Priscilla Hernandez not only uses the fairycore hashtag, which is how I came across her content, but she also dons the aesthetics of medieval fantasy worlds (gowns and flower crowns) and performs in natural spaces, making her a fairycore participant. Hernandez has performed fantasy music for decades, but she admitted to me that she only recently discovered the hashtag "fairycore."[284]

On her website, her bio says that her music "can be described as 'Ethereal gothic' inspired in fairy and ghost tales and with a great component of fantasy."[285] Hernandez's music is designed to sound both ancient and Otherworldly. Her instrumentation and vocals are indicative of the pre-modern world, but modern music technology allows her to manipulate sounds to create more ethereal qualities. For example, in most of her music the reverb levels are

Figure 30: Playlist shared on Instagram

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[284] Message correspondence with Priscilla Hernandez (@yidneth), December 17, 2020.

[285] Priscilla Hernandez, "Priscilla Hernandez singer composer and fantasy illustrator," *Priscilla Hernandez,* Accessed December 28, 2020.

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extremely high, giving the impression that she is performing in a wide-open space. This effect in combination with added layers of her vocalizing, ornamented flute playing, strings, and pounding drums builds on listeners' associations with ancient Western Europe and Otherworldly realms, today largely formed through cinema and video games.

Sara Henya is a different brand of fairycore performer, whom I also found via #fairycore. Henya identifies as a white female (she/her) of Jewish descent, and she is from Pennsylvania. On Spotify, her music is aptly described as "Fantasy-Pop, combining the fun of pop music and the ethereal sound of the harp." Henya's music is not meant to sound as if it is necessarily from a distant time or place; it is much more in-line with pop music today. I asked her to describe how

Figure 31: Henya with harp

her music relates to fantasy/fairy culture, and she explained,

> My music relates to fantasy/fairy culture in lyrical content, instrumentation, and aesthetic styling. I have songs about waking up in a forest where a magical woman on a stag leads you to your destiny, or I follow a Nereid in the sea, or commanding my audience, '...say you believe in magic.'[286] My main instrument is the harp, which has just as old of a tradition as fairies do. Harps have such a broad range of resonance that seems to remind people of supernatural things. I also like to add production elements like high-range synths, and bell sounds that add a sense of whimsy and magic to the songs. Lastly, the visual representations that accompany

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[286] A Nereid is a sea nymph from Greek mythology.

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my music are usually built around a fairy style, including things like corsetry, lens flares, and florals.[287]

Henya's performer identity *is* a fairy (Figures 31-32). I asked her about why she chooses to represent herself this way, and her answer was largely about the relationship between fairies and the natural world. In her words,

> I find a lot of attractive attributes in fairies. Their connection to nature and being truly part of the forest ecosystem in a way that we humans are not, the ability to fly (although traditionally, my understanding is that not all fae have wings or can fly), the mystery around their magic and existence (or non-existence), and their use in popular culture to represent beauty in nature and the autonomy of nature.[288]

Henya's aesthetic decision goes beyond the cute outfits; rather, it is truly an ideological alignment. She grew up immersed in fantasy culture (including science fiction) because her parents are avid convention goers, and she has been attending conventions and fairs since she was seven years old. Today, she performs at conventions such as Arisia, Philcon, Balticon, and local Renaissance fairs (or faires). Besides these events, her online fairycore performance is an important part of her work, and she is "regularly seeking out and making content for this niche."[289] It is through her immersion in

Figure 31: artwork by Aly Castle; Copyright 2017 Sara Henya All Rights Reserved

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[287] Email interview with Sara Henya, December 29, 2020.
[288] Sara Henya, December 29, 2020.

[289] Sara Henya, December 29, 2020.

this culture that she has come to understand fairies as a symbol of the "beauty"

and the "autonomy of nature."[290]

Psych-elfcore band Toadstool Shadow (Figures 33-34) is much more

tattered and undignified. I found this group on Reddit's r/faeries page where they

advertised a new single. Based in Ohio, Toadstool Shadow is really just one

musician, Chris Till (white, he/him), although Till collaborates with others at

times and has recurring cast members star in the band's music videos. As

advertised on their website, the band "aspires to be part of the New Weird

America, electric freak folk, and elfcore movements."[291] New Weird America is a

genre of 2000s-era American folk that takes inspiration from the folk movements

of the 60s-70s instead of older folk genres. Its "weird" quality arises out of mixing

psychedelic music, acoustic, metal, hip hop, free jazz, noise music, and more.[292]

The underlying idea of the genre is pulling from many inspirations to push

musical boundaries. Similarly, freak folk usually involves unusual

instrumentation and sounds. In the band's music videos, Till's fairies (elves,

mermaids, monsters) are not noble like Hernandez's or darling like Henya's. I

asked Till over video chat if he could elaborate on the "core" of elfcore, and he

explained,

> It just lends this punk angle to it, because see these—notice in the videos—these elves, and these fairies, they're in rags, man. They *don't care* about money. They kinda *hate* money… Like *that!* [Flips middle finger] Like *fuck* money, man! Like if they find a piece of gold, they like it because it's pretty.

[290] Sara Henya, December 29, 2020.

[291] "Influences," *Toadstool Shadow,* Accessed Decmber 30, 2020, *https://www.toadstoolshadow.com/influences.html.*

[292] Niels Van Poecke, "The New Weird Generation (I)," *Notes on Metamodernism,* Sept 8, 2010, https://www.metamodernism.com/2010/09/08/the-new-weird-generation-part-1/.

. .You know that's the thing. You know, the Grimm fairytales is all about kings and queens, and like just my opinion you know, I hate kings and queens. You know every time you see a picture of a castle, what that means is there's a dungeon in the basement. You know what I mean? It's a terrible cost.[293]

Figure 33: Toadstool Shadow, "Song of the Golden Unicorn"

Figure 34: Toadstool Shadow, "Leprechaun Man"

Till's fairies represent lower-class resistance against the rich and the mainstream, which is a prime characteristic of counter-culture and punk attitudes. He is taking fantasy tropes and flipping the narrative so that the heroes are not the kings and knights, but rather the peasants and non-human beings. Till does believe that there is magic in the world, and he has a literal belief in "intra-terrestial beings" that go unrecognized by rational thinkers. Toadstool Shadow is currently producing a 3-part fairytale-rock opera, and one of the major themes in this work is to trust in your own "visionary experiences," despite the disbelief of others.[294] These ideas have precedence in history. Carole Silver writes about Victorian and Romantic era folk belief that "in effect, all who asserted that

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[293] Video chat interview with Chris Till, May 22, 2020.
[294] Chris Till, May 22, 2020.

fairies did exist did so with a sense that their reality was a protest against sterile

rationality, evidence that the material and utilitarian were not sole rulers of the

world."[295] In sum, suggesting a belief in fairies (whether or not one has a literal

belief) is rather punk.

Toadstool Shadow's aesthetic is precisely a "protest against sterile

rationality," combining fairy crowns and costume wings with combat boots,

thrifted and torn clothing, and homemade elf hats. While Toadstool Shadow is

ideologically and aesthetically aligned with punk, the sound worlds are largely

different. Till records most of the music himself, and his career in instrument

restoration can be heard in the miscellany of instruments and timbres used. Each

of his songs is unique, but most of the time they involve accessory percussion

instruments (small drums, ratchets, shakers), electric and acoustic guitar, and

some synthesized sounds. Till's vocals are delivered with a folk-like twang, and

the songs are generally unhurried and somewhat nonsensical in their subject

matter. Unlike hardcore punk, Toadstool Shadow's sound is far from aggressive,

nor does it rely on drum set and a heavy electric guitar presence.

Besides protesting rationality, the fairies and elves in Till's productions

seem to be resisting the capitalist work ethic. For example, in the music video for

"Leprechaun Man," the elves and fairies are loitering in an alley, smoking, and

dancing with an assortment of instruments (Figure 34). These grown adults in elf

hats, not wearing shoes, appropriating rural spaces (privately owned land), and

enjoying themselves are a small but compelling challenge to capitalist

[295] Carole Silver, "On the Origin of Fairies: Victorians, Romantics, and Folk Belief," *Browning Institute Studies* 14 (1986): 148. Accessed September 10, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057792.

productivity. Rather than modeling "productive" adult behavior, Till's elves prioritize fun and mischief, and they are always just outside of everyday human spaces.[296] Several of the music videos even start with a camera panning from the everyday world into an alternative space such as a back alley, a nearby forest, or into the roots of a tree where the fairies and elves are dancing and making music together. Toadstool Shadow's aesthetic is not simply pre-modern or earthy; rather, they align themselves with the destitute and are portrayed as skeptics of authority.

Conclusions

The content tagged under fairycore, goblincore, and other related subgenres is highly differentiated and constantly changing; however, certain themes resonate throughout these bodies of work. Users often partake in fairy aesthetics as a way of performing other marginalized aspects of their own identity. By aligning their identities with Otherworldly beings or mythical creatures, they purposefully distinguish themselves from normative lifestyles. Social media applications allow users to create spaces in which they have control over how they construct their identities, and through these aesthetics they are better able to exhibit aspects of themselves that are perhaps unwelcome, dismissed, or unattainable in their daily lives.

We have also seen how users create their own heterotopias through their framing of the natural world. Users present natural spaces as enchanted and

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[296] In "Leprechaun Man," the back-alley elves are shown trying to lure a police officer away (presumably to their fairyland).

mysterious, creating a distinction between these spaces and the places we habitually occupy. The natural world also serves as a stage for fc and gc performances in which users might display their outfits/costumes or partake in aesthetically appropriate activities (playing with frogs, gardening). What makes these heterotopias distinct from daily living is how users emphasize their relationship to the natural world. Participants appear to be of the earth or even guardians of the natural world, privileging sustainability and stewardship over efficiency and progress.

Music is used to further distinguish these heterotopias from daily life. Users choose aesthetically appropriate sounds/music for their online performances, thus providing a soundscape for their fantasy worlds. Curated playlists guide users in choosing appropriate music for their desired aesthetic, and they also allow participants to enchant the world around them. Many musicians promote their music within these niche online communities because music plays an essential role in online performance more broadly, and especially in performing fairy aesthetics.

Fairies are aesthetically powerful because of the symbolic value that they have accumulated throughout history and in popular culture. For fc and gc participants, they represent the earth, gender/sexual freedom, and the possibility of magic within the rational and modern world, which has been a thread throughout these chapters. These online archives of fc and gc content contain multitudes of subtle challenges to normativity in miniature. By taking this content into serious consideration, we begin to understand the significance of these forms of play to its participants. What happens within fc and gc content has

reverberations in the real world. It is not a self-contained system, but rather, these subgenres intersect with mainstream art, entertainment, LGBTQ+ representation, and even political ideas. It is a growing movement of ideas and signs, especially among young people, inspired by the ancient past and aimed at creating a more enchanted future.

All of my research and writing for this thesis took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I have also mentioned instances when the pandemic has impacted the experiences of my interlocutors. Travel restrictions and social-distancing measures severely limited ethnographic possibilities, but I was fortunate to connect with my interlocutors through online platforms. I remain inspired by the artists, storytellers, and musicians who, during such global tragedy, found creative ways to bring joy to people. This is a testament to the charming stubbornness of the people that move within these spaces. They *insist* on finding the beauty, mystery, and magic in their lives, and I am thankful that they continue to share it with the world.

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